**PHILIP ZIMBARDO & THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT**

It began with an ad in the classifieds.

*Male college students needed for psychological study of prison life. $15 per day for 1-2 weeks.* More than 70 people volunteered to take part in the study, to be conducted in a fake prison housed inside Jordan Hall, on Stanford's Main Quad. The leader of the study was 38-year-old psychology professor Philip Zimbardo. He and his fellow researchers selected 24 applicants and randomly assigned each to be a prisoner or a guard.

Zimbardo encouraged the guards to think of themselves as actual guards in a real prison. He made clear that prisoners could not be physically harmed, but said the guards should try to create an atmosphere in which the prisoners felt "powerless."

The study began on Sunday, August 17, 1971. But no one knew what, exactly, they were getting into.

Each prisoner was systematically searched and stripped naked. He was then deloused with a spray to convey that the guards believed he may have germs or lice.

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.

The guards were given no specific training on how to be guards. Instead they were free, within 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 Warden David Jaffe, an undergraduate from Stanford University. They were warned, however, of the potential seriousness of their mission and of the possible dangers in the situation they were about to enter, as, of course, are real guards who voluntarily take such a dangerous job.

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 mirrored sunglasses, which prevented anyone from seeing their eyes or reading their emotions, and thus helped to further promote their anonymity. The guards were being studied as well, as these individuals found themselves in a new power-laden role.

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. When seeing the guards demand push-ups from the prisoners, observers initially thought this was an inappropriate kind of punishment for a prison – a rather juvenile and minimal form of punishment. However, it was later learned that push-ups were often used as a form of punishment in Nazi concentration camps. 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.

Because the first day passed without incident, the observing researchers 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 of their numbers, and barricaded themselves inside the cells by putting their beds against the door. And now the problem was, what could be done about the rebellion? 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 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 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. Some of the prisoners began suffering from acute emotional disturbance, disorganized thinking, uncontrollable crying and rage.

For six days, half the study's participants endured cruel and dehumanizing abuse at the hands of their peers. At various times, they were taunted, stripped naked, deprived of sleep and forced to use plastic buckets as toilets. Some of them rebelled violently; others became hysterical or withdrew into despair. As the situation descended into chaos, the researchers stood by and watched—until one of their colleagues finally spoke out.

The public's fascination with the Stanford Prison Experiment and its implications—the notion, as Zimbardo says, "that these ordinary college students could do such terrible things when caught in that situation"—brought Zimbardo international renown. It also provoked criticism from other researchers, who questioned the ethics of subjecting student volunteers to such extreme emotional trauma. The study had been approved by Stanford's Human Subjects Research Committee, and Zimbardo says that "neither they nor we could have imagined" that the guards would treat the prisoners so inhumanely.

In 1973, an investigation by the American Psychological Association concluded that the prison study had satisfied the profession's existing ethical standards. But in subsequent years, those guidelines were revised to prohibit human-subject simulations modeled on the Stanford Prison Experiment. "No behavioral research that puts people in that kind of setting can ever be done again in America," Zimbardo says.

The Stanford Prison Experiment became the subject of numerous books and documentaries, a feature film, and the name of at least one punk band. In the last decade, after the revelations of abuses committed by U.S. military and intelligence personnel at prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Stanford Prison Experiment provided lessons in how good people placed in adverse conditions can act barbarically.

The experiment is still a source of controversy and contention—even among those who took part in it. Here, in their own words, some of the key players in the drama reflect on their roles and how those six days in August changed their lives.

**THE SUPERINTENDENT**

**Phil Zimbardo**  
*Zimbardo joined Stanford's psychology department in 1968 and taught there until his retirement in 2007.*

The study was focused originally on how individuals adapt to being in a relatively powerless situation. I was interested in prisoners and was not really interested in the guards. It was really meant to be a single, dramatic demonstration of the power of the situation on human behavior. We expected that we would write some articles about it and move on.

After the end of the first day, I said, "There's nothing here. Nothing's happening." The guards had this antiauthority mentality. They felt awkward in their uniforms. They didn't get into the guard mentality until the prisoners started to revolt. Throughout the experiment, there was this conspiracy of denial—everyone involved was in effect denying that this was an experiment and agreeing that this is a prison run by psychologists.

There was zero time for reflection. We had to feed the prisoners three meals a day, deal with the prisoner breakdowns, deal with their parents, run a parole board. By the third day I was sleeping in my office. I had become the superintendent of the Stanford county jail. That was who I was: I'm not the researcher at all. Even my posture changes—when I walk through the prison yard, I'm walking with my hands behind my back, which I never in my life do, the way generals walk when they're inspecting troops.

We had arranged for everyone involved—the prisoners, guards and staff—to be interviewed on Friday by other faculty members and graduate students who had not been involved in the study. Christina Maslach, who had just finished her PhD, came down the night before. She's standing outside the guard quarters and watches the guards line up the prisoners for the 10 o'clock toilet run. The prisoners come out, and the guards put bags over their heads, chain their feet together and make them put their hands on each other's shoulders, like a chain gang. They're yelling and cursing at them. Christina starts tearing up. She said, "I can't look at this."

I ran after her and we had this argument outside Jordan Hall. She said, "It's terrible what you're doing to these boys. How can you see what I saw and not care about the suffering?" But I didn't see what she saw. And I suddenly began to feel ashamed. This is when I realized I had been transformed by the prison study to become the prison administrator. At that point I said, "You're right. We've got to end the study."

It wasn't a formal experiment. My colleagues probably never thought much of it. But as a result of the prison study, I really became more aware of the central role of power in our lives. I became more aware of the power I have as a teacher. I started consciously doing things to minimize the negative use of power in the classroom. I encouraged students to challenge me.

I think I became more self-reflective. I'm more generous and more open because of that experience. I think it made me a better person.

**THE GUARDS**

**Dave Eshelman** *The son of a Stanford engineering professor, Eshelman was a student at Chapman University at the time of the experiment. He was the prison's most abusive guard, patterning himself after the sadistic prison warden (portrayed by Strother Martin) in the movie Cool Hand Luke. Today he owns a mortgage business in Saratoga.*

I was just looking for some summer work. I had a choice of doing this or working at a pizza parlor. I thought this would be an interesting and different way of finding summer employment.

The only person I knew going in was John Mark. He was another guard and wasn't even on my shift. That was critical. If there were prisoners in there who knew me before they encountered me, then I never would have been able to pull off anything I did. The act that I put on—they would have seen through it immediately.

What came over me was not an accident. It was planned. I set out with a definite plan in mind, to try to force the action, force something to happen, so that the researchers would have something to work with. After all, what could they possibly learn from guys sitting around like it was a country club? So I consciously created this persona. I was in all kinds of drama productions in high school and college. It was something I was very familiar with: to take on another personality before you step out on the stage. I was kind of running my own experiment in there, by saying, "How far can I push these things and how much abuse will these people take before they say, 'knock it off?'" But the other guards didn't stop me. They seemed to join in. They were taking my lead. Not a single guard said, "I don't think we should do this."

The fact that I ramped up the intimidation and the mental abuse without any real sense as to whether I was hurting anybody? I definitely regret that. But in the long run, no one suffered any lasting damage. When the Abu Ghraib scandal broke, my first reaction was, this is so familiar to me. I knew exactly what was going on. I could picture myself in the middle of that and watching it spin out of control. When you have little or no supervision as to what you're doing, and no one steps in and says, "Hey, you can't do this"—things just keep escalating. You think, how can we top what we did yesterday? How do we do something even more outrageous? I felt a deep sense of familiarity with that whole situation.

**THE PRISONER**

**Richard Yacco** *A community college student at the time, Yacco helped instigate a revolt against conditions in Zimbardo's prison. He was released one day early from the study after exhibiting signs of depression. After working in radio and television production, he now teaches at a public high school in Oakland.*

At the time I was debating: If I were drafted to fight in Vietnam, what would I do? Would I be willing to go to jail? Since that was one of the considerations, I thought, well, a prison experiment would give me some insight into what that would be like.

The first thing that really threw me off was the sleep deprivation. When they woke us up the first time, I had no idea it was after only four hours of sleep. It was only after they got us up and we did some exercises and then they let us go back to bed that I realized they were messing with our sleep cycles. That was kind of a surprise from the first night.

I don't recall exactly when the prisoners started rebelling. I do remember resisting what one guard was telling me to do and being willing to go into solitary confinement. As prisoners, we developed solidarity—we realized that we could join together and do passive resistance and cause some problems. It was that era. I had been willing to go on marches against the Vietnam war, I went on marches for civil rights, and was trying to figure out what I would do to resist even going into the service. So in a way I was testing some of my own ways of rebelling or standing up for what I thought was right.

My parents came on visitors' night. They were really concerned with the way I looked. I told them that they're breaking up our sleep, that we weren't having the chance to take showers. My appearance really concerned both of my parents, my mother especially.

When I asked [Zimbardo's team] what I could do if I wanted to quit, I was told, "You can't quit—you agreed to be here for the full experiment." That made me feel like a prisoner at that point. I realized I had made a commitment to something that I now could not change. I had made myself a prisoner.

I ended up being paroled by the "parole board." They released me Thursday night. That's when they told me they were going to end the experiment the next day. What I learned later is that the reason they chose me [to parole] is because they thought I'd be the next guy to break down. I was surprised, because I never thought I was going through any kind of depression or anything like that.

One thing that I thought was interesting about the experiment was whether, if you believe society has assigned you a role, do you then assume the characteristics of that role? I teach at an inner city high school in Oakland. These kids don't have to go through experiments to witness horrible things. But what frustrates my colleagues and me is that we are creating great opportunities for these kids, we offer great support for them, why are they not taking advantage of it? Why are they dropping out of school? Why are they coming to school unprepared? I think a big reason is what the prison study shows—they fall into the role their society has made for them.

Participating in the Stanford Prison Experiment is something I can use and share with students. This was one week of my life when I was a teenager and yet here it is, 40 years later, and it's still something that had enough of an impact on society that people are still interested in it. You never know what you're going to get involved in that will turn out to be a defining moment in your life.