



Demonstrating the Power of Social Situations via a Simulated Prison Experiment

In 1971, a team of psychologists designed and executed an unusual experiment that used a mock prison setting, with college students role-playing prisoners and guards to test the power of the social situation to determine behavior. The research, known as the Stanford Prison Experiment, has become a classic demonstration of situational power to influence individual attitudes, values and behavior. So extreme, swift and unexpected were the transformations of character in many of the participants that this study -- planned to last two-weeks -- had to be terminated by the sixth day.

Findings

A person-centered analysis of human behavior attributes most behavior change, in positive or negative directions, to internal, dispositional features of individuals. The factors commonly believed to direct behavior are to be found in the operation of genes, temperament, personality traits, personal pathologies and virtues. A situation-centered approach, in contrast, focuses on factors external to the person, to the behavioral context in which individuals are functioning. Although human behavior is almost always a function of the interaction of person and situation, social psychologists have called attention to the attributional biases in much of psychology and among the general public that overestimates the importance of dispositional factors while underestimating situational factors. This "fundamental attribution error" they argue, leads to a misrepresentation of both causal determinants and means for modifying undesirable behavior patterns. Research ([/research/action/order.aspx](http://www.apa.org/research/action/order.aspx)) by social psychologist Stanley Milgram, PhD, (1974; see also Blass, 1999) was one of the earliest demonstrations of the extent to which a large sample of ordinary American citizens could be led to blindly obey unjust authority in delivering extreme levels of shock to an innocent "victim."

The Stanford Prison Experiment extended that analysis to demonstrate the surprisingly profound impact of institutional forces on the behavior of normal, healthy participants. Philip Zimbardo, PhD, and his research team of Craig Haney, Curtis Banks, David Jaffe, and ex convict consultant, Carlo Prescott (Zimbardo, Haney, Banks, & Jaffe, 1973) designed a study that separated the usual dispositional factors among correctional personnel and prisoners from the situational factors that characterize many prisons. They wanted to determine what prison-like settings bring out in people that are not confounded by what people bring into prisons. They sought to discover to what extent the violence and anti-social behaviors often found in prisons can be traced to the "bad apples" that go into prisons or to the "bad barrels" (the prisons themselves) that can corrupt behavior of even ordinary, good people.

The study was conducted this way: College students from all over the United States who answered a city newspaper ad for participants in a study of prison life were personally interviewed, given a battery of personality tests, and completed background surveys that enabled the researchers to pre-select only those who were mentally and physically healthy, normal and well adjusted. They were randomly assigned to role-play either prisoners or guards in the simulated prison setting constructed in the basement of Stanford University's Psychology Department. The prison setting was designed as functional simulation of the central features present in the psychology of imprisonment (Zimbardo, Maslach, & Haney, 1999). Read a full description (<http://www.prisonexperiment.org>) of the methodology, chronology of daily events and transformations of human character that were revealed.

The major results of the study can be summarized as: many of the normal, healthy mock prisoners suffered such intense emotional stress reactions that they had to be released in a matter of days; most of the other prisoners acted like zombies totally obeying the demeaning orders of the guards; the distress of the prisoners was caused by their sense of powerlessness induced by the guards who began acting in cruel, dehumanizing and even sadistic ways. The study was terminated prematurely because it was getting out of control in the extent of degrading actions being perpetrated by the guards against the prisoners - all of whom had been normal, healthy, ordinary young college students less than a week before.

Significance

The Stanford Prison Experiment has become one of psychology's most dramatic illustrations of how good people can be transformed into perpetrators of evil, and healthy people can begin to experience pathological reactions - traceable to situational forces. Its messages have been carried in many textbooks in the social sciences, in classroom lectures across many nations, and in popular media renditions. Its web site has gotten over 15 million unique page views in the past four years, and more than a million a week in the weeks following the expose of the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American Military Police army reservists in Abu Ghraib Prison.

Practical Application

The lessons of the Stanford Prison Experiment have gone well beyond the classroom (Haney & Zimbardo, 1998). Zimbardo was invited to give testimony to a Congressional Committee investigating the causes of prison riots (Zimbardo, 1971), and to a Senate Judiciary Committee on crime and prisons focused on detention of juveniles (Zimbardo, 1974). Its chair, Senator Birch Bayh, prepared a new law for federal prisons requiring juveniles in pre-trial detention to be housed separately from adult inmates (to prevent their being abused), based on the abuse reported in the Stanford Prison Experiment of its juveniles in the pre-trial detention facility of the Stanford jail.

A video documentary of the study, "*Quiet Rage: the Stanford Prison Experiment*," has been used extensively by many agencies within the civilian and military criminal justice system, as well as in shelters for abused women. It is also used to educate role-playing military interrogators in the Navy SEAR program (SURVIVAL, EVASION, and RESISTANCE) on the potential dangers of abusing their power against others who role-playing pretend spies and terrorists (Zimbardo, Personal communication, fall, 2003, Annapolis Naval College psychology staff).

The eerily direct parallels between the sadistic acts perpetrated by the Stanford Prison Experiment guard and the Abu Ghraib Prison guards, as well as the conclusions about situational forces dominating dispositional aspects of the guards' abusive behavior have propelled this research into the national dialogue. It is seen as a relevant contribution to understanding the multiple situational causes of such aberrant behavior. The situational analysis of the Stanford Prison Experiment redirects the search for blame from an exclusive focus on the character of an alleged "few bad apples" to systemic abuses that were inherent in the "bad barrel" of that corrupting prison environment.

Cited Research

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