

**PSY268**  
**Psychology of Morality**

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Contemporary Issues in Psychology

# Overview

- ▶ Prison experiment
- ▶ Morality
- ▶ Psychology in real life
- ▶ Criticism of Zimbardo's experiment

- ▶ Fascination with the experiment
  - *the sense that any individual could become a brutal dictator if given the chance*
- ▶ Willingness to participate in acts of extreme behavior (to help perpetuate the system of tyranny )
  - cannot be understood simply with recourse of the personalities of those involved

- ▶ August 21<sup>st</sup> 1971, George Jackson – 30 year old left-wing radical – was shot dead by correctional officers in California San Quentin State Prison.
- ▶ Jackson had been jailed for murdering a correctional officer John V. Mills, as a revenge for Mills having shot three African-American inmates from his guard tower in Soledad Prison, CA.
- ▶ Jackson's death – circumstances controversial, however – three weeks later – five day riot involving around 1000 prisoners at New York State Attica correctional Facility...33 inmates and 10 guards died.
- ▶ The riot was based in part upon prisoners' demands for better living conditions. On September 9, 1971, responding, in part, to the death of prisoner George Jackson.
  - Complaints included: physical privation, regular taunting from guards, frequent beatings, alleged torture

**QUESTION: What had led the correctional officers, representing law and order, to go so far beyond the bounds of civility and decency?**

# SPE – Stanford Prison Experiment

- ▶ Architect – Phillip Zimbardo
  - Born March 1933, NYC
  - best known for the Stanford Prison Experiment, conducted in the basement of the Stanford University psychology department in 1971.
  - Milgram – controlled experiments, Zimbardo – more interested in free-flowing dynamics
  - Why the experiment and not just observation of the behavior of guards and prisoners in one of the existing prisons???

## ▶ 2 week long experiment

- Ended after 6 days

*“At the end of only six days we had to close down our mock prison because what we saw was frightening. It was no longer apparent to most of the subjects (or to us) where reality ended and their roles began. The majority had indeed become prisoners or guards, no longer able to clearly differentiate between role playing and self. There were dramatic changes in virtually every aspect of their behavior, thinking and feeling. In less than a week the experience of imprisonment undid (temporarily) a lifetime of learning; human values were suspended, self-concepts were challenged and the ugliest, most base, pathological The question to ask of side of human nature surfaced. We were horrified because we saw some boys (guards) treat others as if they were despicable animals, taking pleasure in cruelty, while other boys (prisoners) became servile, dehumanized robots who thought only of escape, of their own individual survival and of their mounting hatred for the guards.”(Zimbardo, 1971)*

## Dispositional X Situational hypothesis

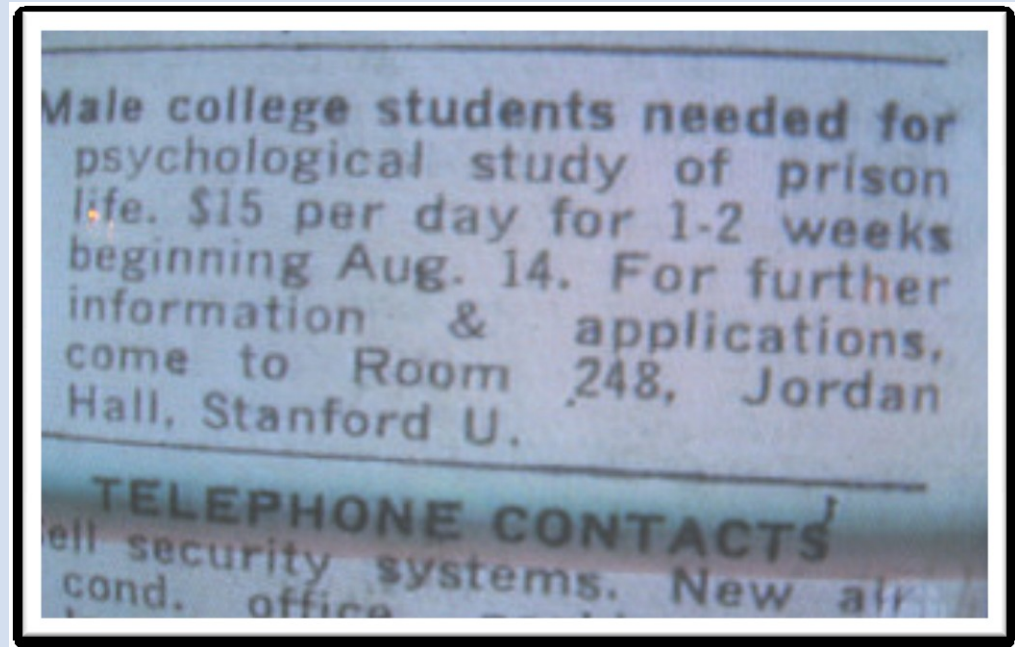
For Zimbardo – SPE untangle the dispositional and situational knot

# Method

- ▶ Participants
- ▶ Random assignment
- ▶ Experimental settings
- ▶ Novelty

# Method

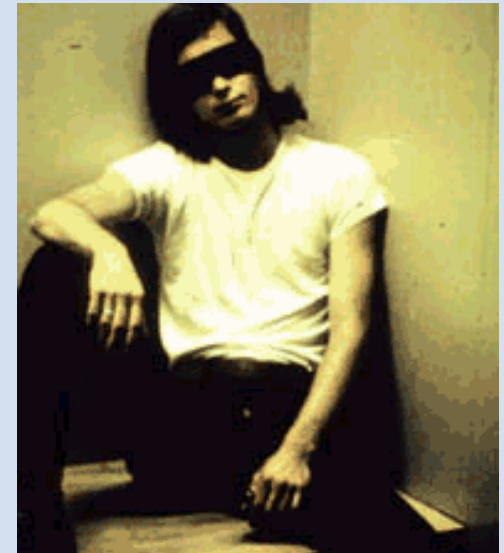
- ▶ Participants
  - Normal personalities, no prior history of psychopathology
  - Advertisement
  - 24 chosen subjects, “most mature, emotionally stable, normal, intelligent”
  - Normal score on the Authoritarianism (characterized by one's belief in absolute obedience or submission to one's own authority, as well as the administration of that belief through the oppression of ones subordinates)
- ▶ Random assignment
- ▶ Experimental settings
- ▶ Novelty





# Method

- ▶ Participants
- ▶ Random assignment
  - Of participants to “prisoners” and “guards” group
  - Contrast to real life – not based on actual law breaking, just random assignment
- ▶ Experimental settings
- ▶ Novelty



# Method

- ▶ Participants
- ▶ Random assignment
- ▶ Experimental settings
  - Controlled, prison-like environment
  - Help of ex-convict
  - The “Hole” (1 x 2m cell)
- ▶ Novelty



# Method

- ▶ Participants
- ▶ Random assignment
- ▶ Experimental settings
- ▶ Novelty
  - No previous experience of the participants with being “prisoner” or “guard”
  - PRISONERS: Contract guaranteed minimal rights (e.g. adequate diet, clothing, medical care) but indicated that some of the basic civil rights might be suspended (e.g. to privacy).
  - GUARDS: Maintain the reasonable degree of order within the prison necessary for its effective functioning



# The beginning

- ▶ Real arrest at home
- ▶ Taken to prison
- ▶ Striped naked, sprayed, placed in cells 2x3 m (6x9ft)
  
- ▶ WHY to use numbers instead of names?
- ▶ Procedure at the beginning, stripping naked, spraying with anti germ liquid...etc.



# The end

- ▶ Guard's brutality towards the prisoners led to premature end – after 6 days
- ▶ Circumstances leading to the end – hard to describe
  
- ▶ 3 main phases of the experiment:
  - Settling in
  - Rebellion
  - Tyranny

# Settling in

- ▶ G and P – not completely into their roles
- ▶ More free atmosphere
- ▶ G – uneasy, guilty, too polite to prisoners
- ▶ Night shift guards – most comfortable in their role, e.g “John Wayne”
  
- ▶ ..slow change in G behavior, more controlling...prisoners form new collective identity

# Rebellion

- ▶ Anger and frustration on side of P
- ▶ P show signs of insubordination – complain about conditions, swear, refuse to follow orders
- ▶ 2 prisoners remove caps and prison numbers
- ▶ “the time has come for violent revolution”
- ▶ Prisoners‘ rights were redefined as privileges
- ▶ Goal of prisoners: to embolden and empower themselves

# Tyranny

- ▶ Counterreaction to rebellion
- ▶ Guards call for reinforcements, broke into prisoner's cells ...
  - Harass and intimidate prisoners
  - Humiliate them
  - Breaking solidarity among prisoners ('divide and rule strategy')
- Prisoner no. 8612





# Tyranny

- 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.
  - After half day switch
  - Confusion among prisoners...thinking some of the other ones must be informants ("snitch")

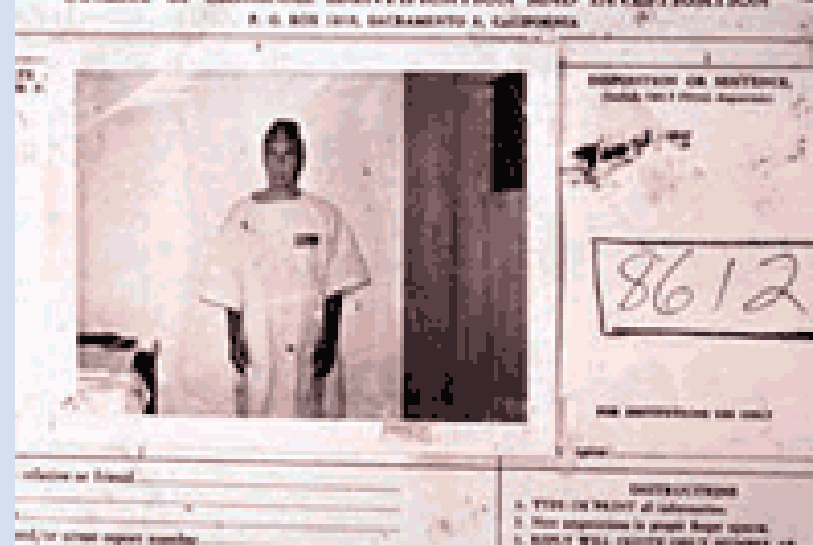
# Parents and Friends visiting

- ▶ Worried that when the parents saw the state of our jail, they might insist on taking their sons home.
- ▶ Manipulated both the situation and the visitors by making the prison environment seem pleasant and benign.



# Prisoner # 8612

- ▶ **The First Prisoner Released**
- ▶ Less than 36 hours into the experiment
- ▶ Suffering from acute emotional disturbance, disorganized thinking, uncontrollable crying, and rage.
- ▶ In spite of all of this – “we thought he was trying to “con” us – to fool us into releasing him.”
- ▶ Primary prison consultant (ex-convict) interviewed Prisoner #8612, lectured 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.
- ▶ #8612 was then **given the offer of becoming an informant** in exchange for no further guard harassment. He was told to think it over.
- ▶ During the next count, Prisoner #8612 told other prisoners, **“You can't leave. You can't quit.”**
- ▶ #8612 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 experimenters became convinced that he was really suffering and that we had to release him.



# A 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.



# A Mass Escape Plot



- ▶ **PLAN A & B** to avoid the escape
- ▶ **A:** An informant (an experimental confederate) was put in the cell that #8612 had occupied. The job of our informant would be to give us information about the escape plot.
- ▶ Then Zimbardo 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).”*

- ▶ **B:** The plan was to dismantle the 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, Zimbardo 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.”*

# Pay back – tyranny

- ▶ When the escape plan was proven to be just a rumor...
  - Increased level of harassment on all levels...



# # 819

- ▶ Feeling sick, refused to talk to the priest, who was invited to evaluate the conditions of the “prison”
- ▶ Eventually he was persuaded to come out of his cell... he broke down and began to cry hysterically.
- ▶ "Prisoner #819 is a bad prisoner. Because of what Prisoner #819 did, my cell is a mess, Mr. Correctional Officer."
- ▶ **Prisoner 819 broke down**
- ▶ 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."

# Types of Prisoners and Guards

- ▶ One third of guards - quite inventive in their techniques of breaking the prisoners and making them feel worthless
- ▶ One third - tough but fair
- ▶ One third - good guards

*“I began to talk, walk, and act like a rigid institutional authority figure, more concerned about the security of ‘my prison’ than the needs of the young men entrusted to my care.”* Zimbardo



# Types of Prisoners and Guards

- ▶ 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.
    - disintegrated, both as a group and as individuals.
- DAY 6 – the experiment was called to an END

# Impact of the SPE

- ▶ What are the main contributions of the experiment?

# Impact of the SPE

- ▶ Ethical debate
- ▶ People's characters *transformed* by the context
- ▶ Recently...Abu Ghraib Prison (2003) resemblance with the SPE  
Zimbardo as expert witness for the defense at the trial of Ivan "Chip" Frederick



# 4 ground stones

- ▶ Participants
- ▶ Random assignment
- ▶ Experimental settings
- ▶ Novelty

# Dispositionalism vs. Situationism

- ▶ Interactionist argument
  - ‘People vary in their propensity for antisocial behavior and the environment transact with personalities’
  - ...not all the guards acted in the most horrible ways

# Questionign SPE

- ▶ “natural”, “novel”, “normal”
- ▶ “natural consequence of being in the uniform of a guard” vs. Zimbardo as the creator of the situation

*“You can create in the prisoners feelings of boredom, a sense of fear to some degree, you can create a notion of arbitrariness that their life is totally controlled by us, by the system, you, me, and they'll have no privacy... We're going to take away their individuality in various ways. In general what all this leads to is a sense of powerlessness. That is, in this situation we'll have all the power and they'll have none.”*

# Questioning SPE

- ▶ “natural”, “novel”, “normal”
- ▶ Guards making use out of the prop provided (bags over the heads, chains, forced nudity) vs. no intervention in using them

*“My opinion, based on my observations, was that Zimbardo began with a preformed blockbuster conclusion and designed an experiment to “prove” that conclusion. Then, when not all guards’ or prisoners’ actions comported with this view, he effectively ignored or downplayed those behaviors. This resulted in broad conclusions that incorrectly painted all student participants with the same broad brush, while minimizing if not ignoring his own active role in the transgressions.”* (Carlo Prescott, Zimbardo’s chief advisor)

# Questioning SPE

- ▶ Participants were “normal college students”
- ▶ Thomas Crnahan & Sam MacFarland – 2 ads in the newspaper
  - ▶ 1/ “college students are needed for psychological study of prison life
  - ▶ 2/ “college students are needed for psychological study
- ▶ 1 / –more authoritarian, more Machiavelian, more narcissistic, more socially dominant, less emphatic, less altruistic
- ▶ ...not all of the participants might have been as “normal” as originally suggested



# Role of Social Identity

- ▶ SIT (Social Identity Theory) – Henry Tajfel, John Turner, 1970s
  - People do not automatically take on roles associated with group membership, but do so only when they have come to identify with the group in question

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  - People do not automatically take on roles associated with group membership, but do so only when they have come to identify with the group in question
  - Reinterpretation of the SPE (Reicher, Haslam, 2006):
    - Guards identified with their role, as promoted by Zimbardo (“*We are going to take away their individuality*”)
    - Prisoners became passive after their identity has been broken down
    - **Guard behavior– specific responses to particular structures that Zimbardo created in the SPE**

# Role of Social Identity

- BBC Prison Study – BPS – same paradigm as Zimbardo, but:
  - No roles assumed within the prison
  - Considering SIT:
- Guards, in the absence of the leadership, argued among themselves about their role (never developed shared sense of identity)
- Prisoners – showed increased resistance to the guards, their social identity was becoming stronger (sense of shared group/collective identity)
- In this experiment – revolt on the day 6 – Prisoners and Guards came to terms to run the prison rather on collaborative than conflictual basis
- Day 7 – new revolt – part of former prisoners and former guards became to demand more power and wanted to established authoritarian system run by them – study was called to early end

# Role of Social Identity

- SAME RESULTS BUT DIFFERENT PATHS leading to it!
- 2<sup>nd</sup> study – people acted not based on *given* roles, but created *new ones*
- Acts of tyranny – *active choice*
- Tyrannical solution – various responses to it. Most enthusiasm amongst most authoritarian participants.
- Tyranny arises neither from situational nor dispositional characteristics, rather is an result of *dynamic interactionism*
  - Context transform individuals, but also individuals transform contexts ( through capacity to represent, lean, and mobilize groups)