

Zimbardo's Prison Experiment

Researchers, led by Philip Zimbardo, created a mock prison in 1973 in a laboratory basement, using as subjects 21 healthy male undergraduate volunteers (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973). Each person was to receive \$15 a day for 2 weeks. Nine of the students were randomly selected to be "prisoners," while the rest were divided into three shifts of "guards," who worked around the clock.

Within a brief time, the "guards" and "prisoners" became totally absorbed in their respective roles. As the guards grew more aggressive, the prisoners became passive and apathetic. No sense of solidarity developed among them. They spent only a tenth of their conversation talking about subjects unrelated to imprisonment. The rest of the time they talked about escape, the quality of the food, and the causes of their discontent.

At first, it was an exciting game, but it quickly became an unpleasant way of living. An hour after the prisoners went to sleep, the guards abruptly woke them and made them line up and repeat their ID numbers. The guards made the prisoners do push-ups until they were exhausted. When the prisoners revolted, they were placed in solitary confinement and even made to clean toilets with their bare hands. The guards then began using psychological tactics, isolating and recombining prisoners until the prisoners no longer trusted one another.

Finally, after only 6 days, the experiment had to be halted. Even with his significant training in social psychology, Zimbardo was unprepared for the psychological influences that took total control of the social environment. He quickly became convinced that behavior does not exist in a vacuum, but is due to a complex variety of variables that psychologists have only begun to understand.

This striking example of psychological research shows how the behavior of the individual can be shaped by the demands of the environment. The fact that prisoners are convicted criminals or that guards may be strict may have little to do with the brutalizing effect of prisons on both prisoners and guards. It also demonstrates how the study of psychology can shed light not only on questions about individual behavior, but also on questions of practical concern to society.