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The Real Lesson of the Stanford Prison Experiment

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In the morning of August 17, 1971, nine young men in the Palo Alto area received visits from local police officers. While their neighbors looked on, the men were arrested for violating Penal Codes 211 and 459 (armed robbery and burglary), searched, handcuffed, and led into the rear of a waiting police car. The cars took them to a Palo Alto police station, where the men were booked, fingerprinted, moved to a holding cell, and blindfolded. Finally, they were transported to the Stanford County Prison—also known as the Stanford University psychology department.

They were [willing participants](#) in the Stanford Prison Experiment, one of the most controversial studies in the history of social psychology. (It's the subject of [a new film](#) of the same name—a drama, not a documentary—starring Billy Crudup, of “Almost Famous,” as the lead investigator, Philip Zimbardo. It opens July 17th.) The study subjects, middle-class college students, had answered a questionnaire about their family backgrounds, physical- and mental-health histories, and social behavior, and had been deemed “normal”; a coin flip divided them into prisoners and guards. According to the lore that's grown up around the experiment, the guards, with little to no instruction, began humiliating and psychologically abusing the prisoners within twenty-four hours of the study's start. The prisoners, in turn, became submissive and depersonalized, taking the abuse and saying little in protest. The behavior of all involved was so extreme that the experiment, which was meant to last two weeks, was terminated after six days.

Less than a decade earlier, the [Milgram obedience study](#) had shown that ordinary people, if encouraged by an authority figure, were willing to shock their fellow-citizens with what they believed to be painful and potentially lethal levels of electricity. To many, the Stanford experiment underscored those findings, revealing the ease with which regular people, if given too much power, could transform into ruthless oppressors. Today, more than forty-five years later, many look to the study to make sense of events like the behavior of the guards at Abu Ghraib and America's epidemic of police brutality. The Stanford Prison Experiment is cited as evidence of the atavistic impulses that lurk within us all; it's said to show that, with a little nudge, we could all become tyrants.

And yet the lessons of the Stanford Prison Experiment aren't so clear-cut. From the beginning, the study has been haunted by ambiguity. Even as it suggests that ordinary people harbor ugly potentialities, it also testifies to the way our circumstances shape our behavior. Was the study about our individual fallibility, or about broken institutions? Were its findings about prisons, specifically, or about life in general? What did the Stanford Prison Experiment really show?

The appeal of the experiment has a lot to do with its apparently simple setup: prisoners, guards, a fake jail, and some ground rules. But, in reality, the Stanford County Prison was a heavily manipulated environment, and the guards and prisoners acted in ways that were largely predetermined by how their roles were

presented. To understand the meaning of the experiment, you have to understand that it wasn't a blank slate; from the start, its goal was to evoke the experience of working and living in a brutal jail.

From the first, the guards' priorities were set by Zimbardo. In a presentation to his Stanford colleagues shortly after the study's conclusion, he [described](#) the procedures surrounding each prisoner's arrival: each man was stripped and searched, "deloused," and then given a uniform—a numbered gown, which Zimbardo called a "dress," with a heavy bolted chain near the ankle, loose-fitting rubber sandals, and a cap made from a woman's nylon stocking. "Real male prisoners don't wear dresses," Zimbardo explained, "but real male prisoners, we have learned, do feel humiliated, do feel emasculated, and we thought we could produce the same effects very quickly by putting men in a dress without any underclothes." The stocking caps were in lieu of shaving the prisoner's heads. (The guards wore khaki uniforms and were given whistles, nightsticks, and mirrored sunglasses inspired by a prison guard in the movie "Cool Hand Luke.")

Often, the guards operated without explicit, moment-to-moment instructions. But that didn't mean that they were fully autonomous: Zimbardo himself took part in the experiment, playing the role of the prison superintendent. (The prison's "warden" was also a researcher.) /Occasionally, disputes between prisoner and guards got out of hand, violating an explicit injunction against physical force that both prisoners and guards had read prior to enrolling in the study. When the "superintendent" and "warden" overlooked these incidents, the message to the guards was clear: all is well; keep going as you are. The participants knew that an audience was watching, and so a lack of feedback could be read as tacit approval. And the sense of being watched may also have encouraged them to perform. Dave Eshelman, one of the guards, [recalled](#) that he "consciously created" his guard 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," Eshelman said. In fact, he continued, "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?'"

Other, more subtle factors also shaped the experiment. It's often said that the study participants were ordinary guys—and they were, indeed, determined to be "normal" and healthy by a battery of tests. But they were also a self-selected group who responded to a newspaper advertisement seeking volunteers for "a psychological study of prison life." In a 2007 study, the psychologists Thomas Carnahan and Sam McFarland asked whether that wording itself may have stacked the odds. They recreated the original ad, and then ran a separate ad omitting the phrase "prison life." They found that the people who responded to the two ads scored differently on a set of psychological tests. Those who thought that they would be participating in a prison study had significantly higher levels of aggressiveness, authoritarianism, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and social dominance, and they scored lower on measures of empathy and altruism.

Moreover, even within that self-selected sample, behavioral patterns were far from homogeneous. Much of the study's cachet depends on the idea that the students responded en masse, giving up their individual identities to become submissive "prisoners" and tyrannical "guards." But, in fact, the participants responded to the prison environment in all sorts of ways. While some guard shifts were especially cruel, others remained humane. Many of the supposedly passive prisoners rebelled. Richard Yacco, a prisoner, [remembered](#) "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."

What emerges from these details isn't a perfectly lucid photograph but an ambiguous watercolor. While it's true that some guards and prisoners behaved in alarming ways, it's also the case that their environment was designed to encourage—and, in some cases, to require—those behaviors. Zimbardo himself has always been forthcoming about the details and the nature of his prison experiment: he thoroughly explained the setup in his original study and, in [an early write-up](#), in which the experiment was described in broad strokes only, he pointed out that only "about a third of the guards became tyrannical in their arbitrary use of power." (That's about four people in total.) So how did the myth of the Stanford Prison Experiment—"Lord of the Flies" in the psych lab—come to diverge so profoundly from the reality?

In part, Zimbardo's earliest statements about the experiment are to blame. In October, 1971, soon after the study's completion—and before a single methodologically and analytically rigorous result had been published—Zimbardo was asked to testify before Congress about prison reform. [His dramatic testimony](#), even as it clearly explained how the experiment worked, also allowed listeners to overlook how coercive the environment really was. He described the study as “an attempt to understand just what it means psychologically to be a prisoner or a prison guard.” But he also emphasized that the students in the study had been “the cream of the crop of this generation,” and said that the guards were given no specific instructions, and left free to make “up their own rules for maintaining law, order, and respect.” In explaining the results, he said that the “majority” of participants found themselves “no longer able to clearly differentiate between role-playing and self,” and that, in the six days the study took to unfold, “the experience of imprisonment undid, although temporarily, a lifetime of learning; human values were suspended, self-concepts were challenged, and the ugliest, most base, pathological side of human nature surfaced.” In describing another, related study and its implications for prison life, he said that “the mere act of assigning labels to people, calling some people prisoners and others guards, is sufficient to elicit pathological behavior.”

Zimbardo released video to NBC, which ran a feature on November 26, 1971. An article ran in the *Times Magazine* in April of 1973. In various ways, these accounts reiterated the claim that relatively small changes in circumstances could turn the best and brightest into monsters or depersonalized serfs. By the time Zimbardo published [a formal paper about the study](#), in a 1973 issue of the *International Journal of Criminology and Penology*, a streamlined and unequivocal version of events had become entrenched in the national consciousness—so much so that a [1975 methodological critique](#) fell largely on deaf ears.

Forty years later, Zimbardo still doesn't shy away from popular attention. He served as a consultant on the new film, which follows his original study in detail, relying on direct transcripts from the experimental recordings and taking few dramatic liberties. In many ways, the film is critical of the study: Crudup plays Zimbardo as an overzealous researcher overstepping his bounds, trying to create a very specific outcome among the students he observes. The filmmakers even underscore the flimsiness of the experimental design, inserting characters who point out that Zimbardo is not a disinterested observer. They highlight a real-life conversation in which another psychologist asks Zimbardo whether he has an “independent variable.” In describing the study to his Stanford colleagues shortly after it ended, Zimbardo recalled that conversation: “To my surprise, I got really angry at him,” he said. “The security of my men and the stability of my prison was at stake, and I have to contend with this bleeding-heart, liberal, academic, effete dingdong whose only concern was for a ridiculous thing like an independent variable. The next thing he'd be asking me about was rehabilitation programs, the dummy! It wasn't until sometime later that I realized how far into the experiment I was at that point.”

In a broad sense, the film reaffirms the opinion of John Mark, one of the guards, who, looking back, has said that Zimbardo's interpretation of events was too shaped by his expectations to be meaningful: “He wanted to be able to say that college students, people from middle-class backgrounds ... will turn on each other just because they're given a role and given power. Based on my experience, and what I saw and what I felt, I think that was a real stretch.”

If the Stanford Prison Experiment had simulated a less brutal environment, would the prisoners and guards have acted differently? In [December, 2001](#), two psychologists, Stephen Reicher and Alexander Haslam, tried to find out. They worked with the documentaries unit of the BBC to partially recreate Zimbardo's setup over the course of an eight-day experiment. Their guards also had uniforms, and were given latitude to dole out rewards and punishments; their prisoners were placed in three-person cells that followed the layout of the Stanford County Jail almost exactly. The main difference was that, in this prison, the preset expectations were gone. The guards were asked to come up with rules prior to the prisoners' arrival, and were told only to make the prison run smoothly. (The BBC Prison Study, as it came to be called, differed from the Stanford experiment in a few other ways, including prisoner dress; for a while, moreover, the prisoners were told that they could become guards through good behavior, although, on the third day, that offer was revoked, and the roles were made permanent.)

Within the first few days of the BBC study, it became clear that the guards weren't cohering as a group. "Several guards were wary of assuming and exerting their authority," the researchers wrote. The prisoners, on the other hand, developed a collective identity. In a change from the Stanford study, the psychologists asked each participant to complete a daily survey that measured the degree to which he felt solidarity with his group; it showed that, as the guards grew further apart, the prisoners were growing closer together. On the fourth day, three cellmates decided to test their luck. At lunchtime, one threw his plate down and demanded better food, another asked to smoke, and the third asked for medical attention for a blister on his foot. The guards became disorganized; one even offered the smoker a cigarette. Reicher and Haslam reported that, after the prisoners returned to their cells, they "literally danced with joy." ("That was fucking sweet," one prisoner remarked.) Soon, more prisoners began to challenge the guards. They acted out during roll call, complained about the food, and talked back. At the end of the sixth day, the three insubordinate cellmates broke out and occupied the guards' quarters. "At this point," the researchers wrote, "the guards' regime was seen by all to be unworkable and at an end."

Taken together, these two studies don't suggest that we all have an innate capacity for tyranny or victimhood. Instead, they suggest that our behavior largely conforms to our preconceived expectations. All else being equal, we act as we think we're expected to act—especially if that expectation comes from above. Suggest, as the Stanford setup did, that we should behave in stereotypical tough-guard fashion, and we strive to fit that role. Tell us, as the BBC experimenters did, that we shouldn't give up hope of social mobility, and we act accordingly.

This understanding might seem to diminish the power of the Stanford Prison Experiment. But, in fact, it sharpens and clarifies the study's meaning. Last weekend brought the tragic news of [Kalief Browder's suicide](#). At sixteen, Browder was arrested, in the Bronx, for allegedly stealing a backpack; after the arrest, he was [imprisoned at Rikers for three years without trial](#). (Ultimately, the case against him was dismissed.) While at Rikers, Browder was the object of violence from both prisoners and guards, [some of which was captured on video](#). It's possible to think that prisons are the way they are because human nature tends toward the pathological. But the Stanford Prison Experiment suggests that extreme behavior flows from extreme institutions. Prisons *aren't* blank slates. Guards do indeed self-select into their jobs, as Zimbardo's students self-selected into a study of prison life. Like Zimbardo's men, they are bombarded with expectations from the first and shaped by preëxisting norms and patterns of behavior. The lesson of Stanford isn't that any random human being is capable of descending into sadism and tyranny. It's that certain institutions and environments demand those behaviors—and, perhaps, can change them.