

Zimbardo (1971) - The Stanford prison experiment

Describe and evaluate Zimbardo's research into conformity (16 marks)



METHOD

Participants

A group of all American male students were chosen through a volunteer sample. Those selected were deemed to be 'emotionally stable' after extensive psychological testing.

Procedure

Students were randomly assigned roles of 'prisoners' or 'guards'. To heighten realism, 'prisoners' were arrested in their homes by local police & delivered to the 'prison' (a converted basement in Stanford university). 'Prisoners' were blindfolded, strip-searched, deloused and issued a uniform and a number.

Social roles of 'prisoners' and 'guards' were strictly divided. 'Prisoner's' daily routines heavily regulated. They had 16 rules to follow, which were enforced by the 'guards' who worked in shifts, 3 at a time. 'Prisoners' names never used, only numbers.

'Guards' had their own uniform, with wooden club, handcuffs, keys and mirror shades (so their eyes couldn't be seen—deindividuation). 'Guards' told they had complete power over 'prisoners' (e.g. deciding when they could go to the toilet), but were told by Zimbardo and his team they couldn't use physical violence.

Zimbardo (1971) - The Stanford prison experiment

FINDINGS:

After a slow start to the simulation, the 'guards' took up their roles with enthusiasm. Their behaviour became a threat to the physical and psychological health of the 'prisoners'. Study was stopped after 6 days even though intended for 14!

Within 2 days the 'prisoners' rebelled against harsh treatment, ripping uniforms and shouting and swearing at 'guards' who retaliated with fire extinguishers.

Guards used 'divide-and-rule' tactics playing 'prisoners' off against each other. They harassed 'prisoners' constantly by conducted frequent headcounts, sometimes in the middle of the night where 'prisoners' were required to stand in line and call out their number. 'Guards' highlighted differences in social roles by creating plenty of opportunities to enforce rules and punish for the slightest thing.

Prisoners became subdued after rebellion was put down and became depressed & anxious. One 'prisoner' was released on first day after showing psychological disturbance, two more released on day 4 and one 'prisoner' went on hunger strike. Guards attempted to force feed him and punished him by putting him in 'the hole' (a dark closet used for solitary confinement). This 'prisoner' was shunned by the others as the 'guards' behaviour intensified due to his behaviour.

'Guards' behaviour became more brutal and aggressive with some appearing to enjoy the power over their prisoners.

CONCLUSIONS:

The simulation showed the power of the situation to influence people's behaviour. 'Guards', 'prisoners' & even researchers such as Zimbardo conformed to their social roles. Even volunteers coming in to provide certain functions e.g. 'prison chaplain' found themselves behaving as if the prison simulation was real!

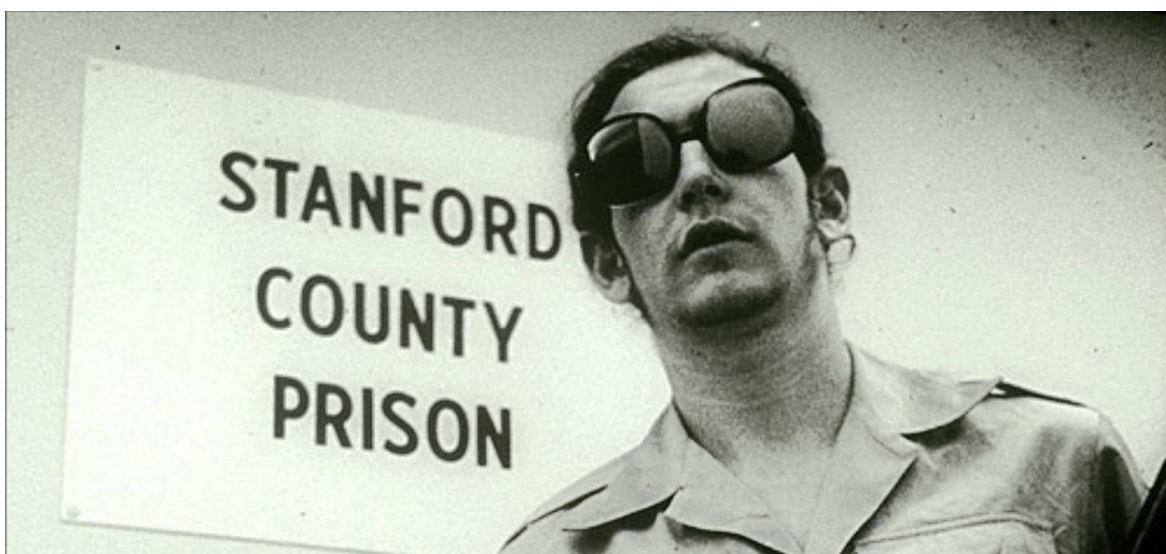


Zimbardo (1971) - The Stanford prison experiment

QUESTIONS

Use what you have learnt and information for the official Stanford Prison Experiment website (<http://www.prisonexp.org/>) to answer the following questions

1. Explain how the study can be criticised for Androcentrism, ethnocentrism?
2. Explain why the sampling method might be considered to be an issue in this study
3. Discuss the ethical problems that arose as a result of this study
4. Explain which type of social conformity is evident in Zimbardo's prison experiment?
5. Explain what this study suggests about conformity to social roles.



Zimbardo (1971) - The Stanford prison experiment

EVALUATION

Strengths	Limitations
P E E L	P E E L
P E E L	P E E L
P E E L	P E E L