

Social Psychology

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S. Alexander Haslam, Alan M. Slater and Joanne R. Smith
School of Psychology, University of Exeter, Exeter EX4 4QG

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Tyranny

Revisiting Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment

*S. Alexander Haslam and Stephen
Reicher*

BACKGROUND

On 21 August 1971, George Jackson – a 30 year-old left-wing radical – was shot dead by correctional officers in California's San Quentin State Prison. Jackson was a Black Panther who had been jailed for murdering a correctional officer, John V. Mills, in retaliation for Mills having shot three black inmates from his guard tower in Soledad Prison in Monterey County, California. The circumstances of Jackson's death are controversial, but three weeks later they were the catalyst for a five-day riot involving around 1,000 inmates at New York State's Attica Correctional Facility. In this, a further 33 inmates and 10 guards died.

Accounts from prisoners at Attica suggest that their uprising was a response to the appalling conditions that they were forced to endure inside the prison. On top of physical privation, these included regular taunting from guards, frequent beatings and alleged torture. Furthermore, according to *Time* magazine, after the riot, 'Nothing was done to prevent reprisals. Inmates were made to run naked through gauntlets of enraged guards, who had "anesthetized their humanity"' (1972: 22).

These episodes of spiraling violence shocked Americans and made international news. This is unsurprising, since, at the time, the Attica uprising was the bloodiest confrontation on American soil since the Civil War. Amongst other things, it motivated a series of enquiries into the US prison system and led people to ask questions about the psychology of those who were involved – especially the psychology of those correctional officers whose job it was to represent authority and the rule of law. What had led them to go so far beyond the bounds of civility and decency? What had led them to betray the morals and values they were meant to be upholding and descend into brutal, thuggish tyranny?

Important as they were at the time, some 33 years later, Americans and the rest of the world would ask these very same questions with even greater force. This

time they were responding to graphic evidence of American soldiers subjecting Iraqi detainees to appalling abuse inside Abu Ghraib Prison, 20 miles west of Baghdad. In a lurid documentary shown on *60 Minutes II* and in photographs that made news around the world, images showed soldiers smiling proudly as they subjected detainees to a series of degrading humiliations. Hooded and naked, prisoners were pictured piled on top of each other on the floor, standing in stress positions on boxes with wires attached to their hands, or being threatened by menacing dogs. How was it possible that 'the fine young men and women sent overseas on the glorious mission of bringing democracy and freedom to Iraq' could contemplate, let alone perpetrate, such acts (Zimbardo, 2007: 324)? How could any reasonable human being do such things?

In both 1971 and 2004, the search for answers to these pressing questions led journalists, politicians, academics, lawyers and the general public inexorably towards one psychologist and one classic social psychological study: Philip Zimbardo and the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE).

Zimbardo was a full professor at Stanford who had completed his PhD at Yale in 1959, nine years after graduating from James Monroe High School in the Bronx in the same class as Stanley Milgram. Like Milgram (see Chapter 7), Zimbardo was interested in exploring the ways in which social influences can contribute to extreme behaviors. However, where Milgram had been concerned to investigate the behavior of individuals in tightly controlled experimental settings, Zimbardo wanted to explore the free-flowing dynamics that emerge when groups interact within a prison environment.

Of course, like many criminologists before him, Zimbardo might have explored these questions by conducting research inside one of the many hundreds of penal establishments spread across the United States. Clearly, though, if he had found evidence of brutality akin to that in San Quentin or Attica, it would have been hard to know to what extent this was a reflection of the prison system itself. In particular, he would not have been able to rule out the possibility that extreme behavior was a product of the personalities and characters of those who worked and who were incarcerated there. Accordingly, Zimbardo took two bold initiatives. First, he used funds he had received from the Office of Naval Research to build his own prison in the basement of the Stanford Psychology Department (see Figure 8.1). Second, he recruited 24 male college students to serve as prisoners and guards.

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT

As fate would have it, the day before George Jackson died in San Quentin, Zimbardo's own prison study was being brought to a close just 52 miles away. The experiment had been scheduled to last for two weeks but it had been brought to an end after just six days. As Zimbardo reported to Congressional Hearings two months later, the reason for this premature termination was that the mock prison he had created had become a living hell:



Figure 8.1 The Psychology Department in Jordan Hall at Stanford University where the SPE was brought to a close on 20 August 1971 (left) and San Quentin State Prison (right) where George Jackson was killed the following day. Permission: Penni Gladstone Photography.

At the end of only six days we had to close down our mock prison because what we saw was frightening ... 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 side of human nature surfaced. We were horrified because we saw some boys ('guards') treat other boys as if they were despicable animals, taking pleasure in cruelty, while other boys ('prisoners') became servile, dehumanized robots. (Zimbardo, 1971: 154)

Indeed, the level of abuse in the prison was so intense that five of the participants who had been assigned to be prisoners had needed to be released early because they were showing disturbing signs of psychopathology. Again, then, as with the abuses witnessed in real prisons, the critical question was how had this come about?

Prior to this point, it had been common for psychologists to answer such questions by arguing that brutality and oppression are a straightforward reflection of the pathological dispositions of those who become agents of tyranny. This *dispositional hypothesis* argues that pathological systems are produced by people who are themselves in some sense pathological. For example, researchers had argued that people who are sympathetic to tyrannical regimes have an authoritarian personality type that makes them deferential to strong leaders and disdainful of weak groups. However, the participants in the SPE were 'normal healthy male college students' (Haney et al., 1973: 5) and they had been randomly assigned to their roles as guards or prisoners. Accordingly, the extreme behavior witnessed in the study could not be explained simply as a manifestation of participants' deviant personality.

As an alternative to this dispositional account, Zimbardo argued passionately for a *situational hypothesis* – suggesting that people's behavior is primarily determined by the social context in which they find themselves. As he put it to the Congressional Hearings:

Individual behavior is largely under the control of social forces and environmental contingencies rather than 'personality traits', 'character', 'will power', or other empirically unvalidated constructs. Many people, perhaps the majority, can be made to do almost anything when put in psychologically compelling situations – regardless of their morals, ethics, values, attitudes, beliefs, or personal convictions ... The mere act of assigning labels to people, such as 'prisoners' and 'guards' and putting them in situations where these labels acquire validity and meaning, is sufficient to elicit pathological behavior ... The prison system ... is guaranteed to generate severe enough pathological reactions in both guards and prisoners as to debase their humanity. (Zimbardo, 1971: 155)

For Zimbardo, then, the SPE provided an opportunity to 'untangle the dispositional versus situational knot' and, in the process, it generated dramatic and compelling evidence of the tendency for 'negative situational forces to overwhelm positive dispositional tendencies' (Zimbardo, 2004: 39, 40).

METHOD

Zimbardo's confidence in making these claims is underpinned by four features of the SPE's methodology (Zimbardo, 2004: 38–9). As already noted, the first of these is that the *participants* had normal personalities and no prior history of psychopathology. The study started by placing an advert in a newspaper inviting college students to take part in a 'psychological study of prison life'. Seventy-five people responded to this advert and Zimbardo's student assistants, Craig Haney and Curtis Banks, interviewed them in order to select the 24 who were most 'mature, emotionally stable, normal, intelligent' (Zimbardo, 1971: 153). As Zimbardo reported to the Congressional Hearings, they appeared – like the boys in Sherif's earlier camp studies (see Chapter 9) – to represent 'the cream of the crop of this generation' (1971: 153).

This assessment was confirmed, amongst other things, by the measurement of participants' authoritarianism. This revealed that, on average, participants scored in the normal range. Moreover, at the start of the study there was no difference in the average level of the prisoners' and guards' authoritarianism. This was to be expected in light of the study's second important feature – the *random assignment* of participants to guard and prisoner groups. Thus, in contrast to a real prison, the participants had not exercised any form of choice prior to finding themselves in a particular group (indeed, when asked, most had said they wanted to be prisoners). Instead, the experimenters had assigned them to groups by tossing a coin so that, for each participant, there was an equal probability that he would be a guard or a prisoner.

A third important feature of the study was that Zimbardo attempted to create 'an experimental setting that came as close to a functional simulation of the psychology of imprisonment as possible' (Zimbardo, 2004: 39). In the first instance he sought to ensure this by placing himself in the role of Prison Superintendent, and

another student assistant, David Jaffe, in the administrative role of Prison Warden.¹ He also solicited the help of Carlo Prescott – an ex-convict who had previously spent 17 years in San Quentin – to construct a *prison-like environment* that captured relevant features of a prison of the time. Central to this were details that reinforced the low status of the prisoners and the high status of the guards. The study thus started with the prisoners being ‘arrested’ at their home by members of the Palo Alto police force, then fingerprinted and taken into a detention cell. After this they were blindfolded and taken to the ‘prison’, where they were stripped naked, sprayed with what was said to be a delousing agent, and then placed in one of three very small (6 x 9 ft) ‘cells’ that they would share with two other prisoners. They were forced to wear chains on one ankle, smocks without underwear, rubber sandals and a cap made from nylon stocking. To preserve the reality of the prison, whenever the prisoners left the main prison area, they also wore bags over their heads so that they could not see the outside world. In contrast, the guards wore khaki shirts and trousers, they carried a whistle and a night stick, and wore reflective sunglasses. And whereas the prisoners were kept in the prison around the clock, the guards were assigned to work in one of three eight-hour shifts and could go home when not on duty.

The fourth significant feature of the SPE was that the roles to which the participants were assigned were *novel*. The participants had signed up to take part in a ‘psychological study of prison life’ and knew that they would get \$15 a day ‘for 1–2 weeks’. Their contract guaranteed minimal rights (e.g., ‘adequate diet, clothing, medical care’), but also indicated that some of their basic civil rights (e.g., to privacy) might be suspended, ‘excluding physical abuse’ (Haney et al., 1973: 7). Beyond this, though, they did not know what to expect. In particular, this meant that:

Participants had no prior training in how to play the randomly assigned roles. Each subject’s prior societal learning of the meaning of prisons and the behavioral scripts associated with the oppositional roles of prisoner and guard was the sole source of guidance. (Zimbardo, 2004: 39)

Rather than being given formal training, the guards were therefore simply informed that it was their task to ‘maintain the reasonable degree of order within the prison necessary for its effective functioning’ (Haney et al., 1973: 7). To this end, the day before the study started, the guards and prison warden worked together to devise a set of 17 rules by which the prison would be run. Although, ominously, Rule 17 stated that ‘failure to obey any of the above rules may result in punishment’, the guards were not instructed to run the system in a way that involved abusing the prisoners. Instead, this was something that they would work out for themselves.

¹Jaffe had been selected for the role of warden because, as part of a class assignment for Zimbardo, he and some fellow students had previously created a prison in his college dormitory over the course of a weekend. His results – which anticipated those of the SPE – motivated Zimbardo to design a more extensive and controlled replication.

RESULTS

As already noted, the ultimate outcome of the SPE is well known and easy to relate: the guards' brutality towards the prisoners led Zimbardo to call the study to a premature close on the morning of the sixth day. However, the process of arriving at this point was convoluted and harder to describe formally. One reason for this is that the study was never written up formally in a peer-reviewed psychology journal and hence no single 'authorized' publication provides a definitive account of events. Instead, key accounts of the study's findings are provided in different outlets produced for different audiences, in different forms, and at different points in time.

Nevertheless, from these various sources it is clear that the SPE went through at least three distinct phases before its termination. The first phase was one of *settling in* and involved the participants adjusting to the situation in which they found themselves. At this point neither prisoners nor guards were 'completely into their roles' and both groups displayed 'considerable hesitation and some awkwardness' (Zimbardo, 2007: 54). For example, during roll calls, the prisoners did not take their subordinate position especially seriously and the guards were not sure how to assert their authority. Guards, in particular, expressed diverse feelings about their role: some felt guilty and uneasy, some thought they were being too polite to prisoners and that they needed to exert more discipline. Those guards on the night shift appeared to be most comfortable with their role, led by Guard Hellman, an individual who came to earn the nickname 'John Wayne'. He enjoyed getting the prisoners to recite their prisoner number during roll call and gave them press-ups when they made mistakes. And when one of the prisoners showed dissent, the guards on the night shift ordered him into 'the Hole' – a small (2 x 7 ft) windowless closet that the experimenters had set aside to be used for solitary confinement. However, this, together with a number of other small incidents, started to annoy the prisoners and 'combine[d] to give [them] a new collective identity as something more than a collection of individuals trying to survive on their own' (Zimbardo, 2007: 51).

The emergent sense of shared grievance among the prisoners led the study into a second phase: *rebellion*. Angered and frustrated by the treatment that the guards were starting to mete out, some of the prisoners started to formulate plans for rebellion. They began by displaying signs of insubordination – complaining about their conditions, swearing at the guards and refusing to follow their orders. This culminated in the occupants of two cells removing their caps and prison numbers and barricading themselves in their cell. As one cried out in a rallying call to his fellow prisoners, 'the time has come for violent revolution!' (Zimbardo, 2007: 61).

The overall effect of the rebellion was to embolden and empower the prisoners, but it also galvanized the guards in counterreaction and ushered in the study's long third phase: *tyranny*. The guards started by calling for reinforcements and together they decided to meet force with force. The guards broke into the barricaded cells, stripped the prisoners naked and forced the rebellion's ringleader into solitary confinement. As well as starting to harass and intimidate the prisoners more vigorously, guards also now worked to undermine solidarity among the prisoners through a strategy of 'divide and rule'. This involved singling out prisoners

in the cell that had not participated in the revolt for special privileges and reorganizing the cells so that those prisoners who had rebelled were mixed in with those who had not been involved.

Zimbardo's role in instigating or condoning these actions is unclear. Nevertheless it is apparent that he was far from a detached observer. For example, in his role as superintendent, he recruited one rebel (Prisoner #8612) to act as a 'snitch' – offering him preferential treatment for informing on his fellow prisoners. To top this off, #8612 came away from his meeting with Zimbardo with the belief that it was no longer possible to leave the prison, and he returned to his fellow prisoners screaming '*You can't get out of here!*' As Zimbardo recounts, this had a 'transformational impact on the prisoners' (2007: 71). For with the prisoners' collective will now crushed, and that of guards consolidated, the scene was set for the guards to progressively dominate, oppress, and brutalize the prisoners.

Importantly, not all of the guards went down this path. Zimbardo observes that 'about a third became tyrannical in their arbitrary use of power ... [becoming] quite inventive in their techniques of breaking the prisoners and making them feel worthless' (1971: 154). Of the remaining guards, some strove to be 'tough but fair' while others endeavoured to be 'good guards', being friendly to the prisoners and doing them small favors. However, it is for the behavior of the most abusive guards – epitomized by 'John Wayne' – that the study is best known. Over the course of the next four days they subjected the prisoners to increasingly degrading persecution. Roll calls lasted several hours and non-compliant prisoners (in particular, a new prisoner who went on hunger strike in protest at his conditions) were singled out for taunting and humiliation. Others were forced to do push-ups with a guard's foot on their back, or to do menial repetitive tasks including washing out toilet bowls with their bare hands, or to play homoerotic games of leapfrog.

The experimenters too got 'caught up' in these dynamics. Thus, when on Day 3 of the study a rumor spread that the prisoners were planning an escape, Zimbardo introduced a new prisoner as an informer to find out about, and help foil, the plot. When this strategy appeared to be failing, he formulated a second plan in which the guards were instructed 'to chain the prisoners' legs together, put bags over their heads' and move them to another room in the building (Zimbardo, 2007: 97). The experimenters also went to great lengths to convince visitors (in particular, the prisoners' relatives) that the prison system was harmless, and they sat on mock parole boards in which they belittled and verbally abused the prisoners. As the study moved towards its conclusion, then, it was not just the guards and prisoners who succumbed to the power of their role, but also the experimenters. Indeed, not only does Zimbardo cite this realization ('the horror of realizing that *I* could easily have traded places with the most brutal guard'; 1971: 113) as one of his main reasons for ending the study, but he also sees it as one of the SPE's most important messages:

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 as a psychological researcher. In a sense, I consider the extent to which I was transformed to be the most profound measure of the power of the situation. (Zimbardo, 2004: 40)

THE IMPACT OF THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT: CHALLENGING DISPOSITIONALISM

As a vehicle for advancing Zimbardo's situationist thesis, the SPE has proved enormously influential. This is partly because, as well as speaking to core issues in social psychology, the SPE also generated heated ethical debate (e.g., Savin, 1973; Zimbardo, 1973). Indeed, this ultimately prompted the American Psychological Association to tighten guidelines for participation in psychological research in order to ensure that the abuses witnessed at Stanford would never be repeated.

Testimony to the study's impact, the original article by Haney and colleagues has been cited over 600 times, the SPE website receives an average of more than 7,000 visitors a day, and the study has inspired several feature films (notably *Das Experiment* in 2001 and *The Experiment* in 2010). In line with Zimbardo's rationale, the great strength of the study is that it shows that extreme behavior – in this case a willingness to participate in acts of extreme brutality that help to perpetuate a system of tyranny – cannot be understood simply with recourse to the personalities of those involved. In large part this is because, as Zimbardo argues, the SPE provides stark and vivid evidence of the capacity for people's characters to be *transformed* by the context in which they find themselves.

This point has been taken on board by a great many commentators as they struggle to explain the willingness of seemingly civilized people to engage in acts of brutality and barbarism. The historian Christopher Browning (1992) thus draws parallels between the behavior of guards in the SPE and the activities of Reserve Police Battalion (RPB) 101, a mobile Nazi killing unit that roamed German-occupied Poland and murdered at least 38,000 Jews between July 1942 and November 1943. Browning shows that the members of this unit were not fanatics or even particularly pro-Nazi, and were not forced to do what they did. As the title of his book puts it, for Browning they were just 'ordinary men' who, like Zimbardo's guards, succumbed to a system that 'alone was a *sufficient* condition to produce aberrant, anti-social behavior' (1992: 168, original emphasis).

More recently, though, there has been a massive resurgence of interest in the SPE as analysts have attempted to come to terms with the horrific images that emerged from Abu Ghraib in early 2003. Indeed, the parallels between the two prisons are striking, and Zimbardo himself recalls the 'shock of recognition' when he watched the *60 Minutes II* programme in which the abuses of Iraqi detainees were revealed: 'these images made me relive the worst scenes of the Stanford Prison Experiment. There were the bags over prisoners heads; the nakedness; the sexually humiliating games' (2004: 328).

Initial responses by military and political leaders attempted to dismiss these abuses as isolated incidents, and as the perverted actions of a few 'rogue soldiers'. However, Zimbardo questioned this account and went so far as to present himself as an expert witness for the defence at the trial of Ivan 'Chip' Frederick, a staff sergeant accused of torturing detainees at Abu Ghraib. On the basis of evidence

from the SPE, Zimbardo challenged the idea that Frederick did what he did simply because he was a 'bad apple'. Instead, like the guards in the SPE, Zimbardo describes him as a 'chip off the best block' who was unwittingly perverted by the 'bad barrel' in which he found himself (2004: 344).

BEYOND THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT: CHALLENGING SITUATIONISM AND ADVANCING INTERACTIONISM

In presenting the above analysis, Zimbardo won himself many supporters, most notably amongst those who saw the dispositional 'bad apple' narrative as an attempt by US authorities to distance themselves from events at Abu Ghraib, and to deny all responsibility for them. Nevertheless, he also attracted criticism. For example, in a letter to *The Observer* (the official magazine of the Association for Psychological Science) Vladimir Konečni observed that:

Even someone fully convinced of the sufficient applicability of the empirical results marshalled by Zimbardo ... is presumably forced by the existence of guards who did not 'misbehave' to admit that a pure situational explanation cannot be at issue but rather one involving the interaction of situational factors with those of personality, attitudes and expectations. (2007: 9)

Later that year, this same *interactionist* argument was articulated in another letter to *The Observer* in which a group of 49 psychologists protested that 'Zimbardo has misrepresented the scientific evidence in an attempt to offer a purely situational account of the antisocial acts perpetrated at Abu Ghraib' (Donnellan et al., 2007). 'The scientific consensus', they continued, 'is that people vary in their propensity for antisocial behaviour and that environments transact with personalities'. It is notable too that Zimbardo's evidence at Frederick's trial was met with similar skepticism by the Army prosecutor, Christopher Graveline:

Impossible to resist the situational forces? ... Clearly the situation a person faces plays a significant role in his actions, but to say that bad action becomes inevitable negates the responsibility, free will, conscience and character of the person. (Graveline and Clemens, 2010: 179)

QUESTIONING THE SPE: WHAT WAS 'NATURAL', 'NOVEL' AND 'NORMAL'?

Beyond their intellectual difficulties with Zimbardo's situationist position, another reason why commentators and researchers resile from the suggestion that there was 'a certain inevitability' to the abuse shown by guards at Abu Ghraib

is that they have reflected closely on the procedural features of the SPE which are used to support this conclusion. Scrutiny of this form was first provided by Ali Banuazizi and Siamak Movahedi (1975) in a probing *American Psychologist* article which exposed several grounds on which Zimbardo's claims could be questioned.

First, the claim that guard aggression was 'emitted simply as a "natural" consequence of being in the uniform of a "guard" and asserting the power inherent in that role' (Haney et al., 1973: 12) seems inconsistent with the content of Zimbardo's briefing of his guards before the start of the SPE. In this he instructed them:

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 - that they'll have no privacy at all. ... There'll be constant surveillance. Nothing they do will go unobserved. They'll have no freedom of action, they can do nothing, or say nothing that we don't permit. We're going to take away their individuality in various ways. In general what all this leads to is a sense of powerlessness. (Zimbardo, 1989)

As Philip Banyard observes 'it is not, as Zimbardo suggests, the guards who wrote their own scripts on the blank canvas of the SPE, but Zimbardo who creates the script of terror' (2007: 494). Moreover, the idea that the experimenter's guidance is critical to the production of particular outcomes is also supported by a seldom-cited study that Sid Lovibond and his colleagues conducted at the University of New South Wales in the late 1970s (Lovibond et al., 1979). This incorporated three conditions in which guards were instructed to run a prison along very different lines. Challenging any suggestion that guard brutality is either natural or inevitable, the researchers found that if guards were encouraged to engage in 'participatory' practices (e.g., respecting prisoners as individuals and including them in decision-making processes) then the resultant regime was both moderate and benign (which is one reason why the study has not attracted much attention).

Second, while Zimbardo claims that it was the guards who dreamed up the various abuses that were meted out to prisoners in the SPE, it would appear that in this they were simply making use of props and procedures that had been provided by the experimenters (e.g., chains, bags over the head, forced nudity). In some cases the guards were also clearly instructed to use these tools. But even where they were not, the fact that Zimbardo and Jaffe - in their roles as Prison Superintendent and Warden - did not intervene to stop any prisoner abuse, presumably communicated to participants some sense that what they were doing was 'appropriate'. In this way the guards' behavior can be understood as their response to a range of cues and demands that were embedded in the SPE's design (see Banuazizi and Movahedi, 1975). Indeed, this concern was expressed rather more forcibly by Zimbardo's chief advisor, Carlo Prescott, in a letter that he wrote to *The Stanford Daily* in 2005:

My opinion, based on my observations, was that Zimbardo began with a preformed blockbuster conclusion and designed an experiment to 'prove' that conclusion ... How can Zimbardo ... express horror at the behavior of the 'guards' when they were

merely doing what Zimbardo and others, myself included, encouraged them to do or frankly established as ground rules? (2005: 8)

More recently, a third objection to the SPE has focused on Zimbardo's claim that participants in the study were simply normal college students. This point arises from research by Thomas Carnahan and Sam MacFarland (2007) at Western Kentucky University which sought to assess whether there is anything unusual about the type of person who volunteers to participate in such a study. To answer this question, these researchers placed two adverts in a local newspaper. One contained exactly the same wording as the original advert for the SPE, indicating that 'college students [were] needed for a psychological study of prison life'; the other was worded identically but simply omitted the phrase 'of prison life'. When Carnahan and MacFarland subsequently compared the personality profile of the two sets of volunteers, they found that they were very different. Specifically, those who responded to the invitation to take part in 'a study of prison life' (rather than just 'a study') tended to be more authoritarian, more Machiavellian, more narcissistic and more socially dominant. They were also less empathic and less altruistic.

Carnahan and MacFarland acknowledge the difficulty of making inferences about the students who volunteered for the SPE on the basis of these findings. Not least, this is because they cannot explain differences in the behavior of prisoners and guards and are inconsistent with evidence that participants in the SPE had normal levels of authoritarianism (Haney and Zimbardo, 2009). Nevertheless, Carnahan and MacFarland's findings raise the possibility that those who would volunteer for a study like the SPE may not be quite so 'normal' as is generally suggested and that here, as in prisons more generally, certain types of people may be more likely to select themselves into particular situations than others. Again, this suggestion fits both (a) with Zimbardo's own evidence that only one-third of his guards engaged in extreme forms of tyrannical behavior (a figure which, as it happens, corresponds to the proportion of abusive members of RPB 101; Browning, 1992), and (b) with the idea that abuse is product of an *interaction* between the individual and his or her environment rather than simply a product of one or other of these elements in isolation.

EXTENDING THE SPE: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL IDENTITY AND LEADERSHIP

These various challenges to Zimbardo's situationist account are in many ways crystallized in a study that we recently conducted: *The BBC Prison Study* (BPS) (Reicher and Haslam, 2006; see also Haslam and Reicher, 2005, 2009). This revisited issues raised by the SPE using the same basic paradigm as Zimbardo's study – seeking to examine the behavior of 15 men who had been randomly assigned to roles as guards or prisoners within a specially constructed prison-like environment over a period of up to two weeks.

Importantly, the BPS differed from the SPE in two key respects. First, unlike Zimbardo, we did not assume any role within the prison, so that we could study group dynamics without directly managing them. Second, the study involved a number of manipulations which had been devised on the basis of *social identity theory* (SIT). This theory was developed at the University of Bristol in the 1970s by Henri Tajfel and John Turner and, amongst other things, it suggests that 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 (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; see Chapters 9 and 10). This suggests that the roles will only be accepted when they are seen as an expression of a person's sense of self (i.e., the social identity of 'us'). Moreover, the theory suggests that when members of a low-status group (e.g., prisoners) come to develop a sense of shared social identity this can be a basis for them to collectively *resist* oppression rather than just succumb to it (see Haslam and Reicher, in press).

The analysis provided by SIT can be used to reinterpret a number of key events in the SPE. In the first instance, it suggests that guards only came to identify with their role, and to define that role in brutal terms, because a tyrannical social identity was actively promoted by Zimbardo in his guard briefing ('We're going to take away their individuality ...'). Similarly, it suggests that prisoners only became passive because (and after) their social identity had been systematically broken down by the actions of the guards and the experimenters. Rather than guard aggression and prisoner submission being 'natural' expressions of role, SIT therefore provides a basis for seeing these outcomes as specific responses to the *particular* structures that Zimbardo's leadership created in the SPE.

This conclusion is lent further support by several key findings from the BPS (Reicher and Haslam, 2006). First, the study provided no evidence of guards succumbing blindly to their role. Instead, in the absence of leadership from the experimenters, the guards disagreed amongst themselves about how to interpret their role and, as a result, they never developed a shared sense of identity. This meant not only that they were unable to run the prison along tyrannical lines, but also that they had difficulty running it at all. Second, amongst the prisoners there was also no evidence that they were overwhelmed by the context in which they found themselves such that they succumbed uncritically to the demands of their role. Indeed, on the contrary (and as predicted by SIT), as their sense of shared identity increased they displayed increasing resistance to the guards. This culminated on Day 6 of the study when a group of prisoners mounted a revolt that brought the guards' regime to an end and which ushered in a new 'Commune' in which prisoners and guards came together to run the prison along collaborative rather than conflictual lines.

For a number of reasons, however, on Day 7 of the study the Commune itself began to run into difficulty. Significantly too, now tyranny *did* begin to rear its head. Specifically, a group of former prisoners and former guards proposed a coup in which the guard-prisoner divide would be reinstated and they would be the 'new guards'. They requested black berets and black sunglasses as symbols of this

new authoritarian system, and talked about ways of using force to ensure that prisoners 'toed the line'. As at Stanford, this new regime never came to pass because the experimenters brought the study to an early close on Day 8.

Yet while the outcome of the BPS is superficially similar to that of the SPE, the path that led to this outcome suggests a very different analysis of tyranny from that proposed by Zimbardo. In the first instance, this is because when participants in the BPS became committed to tyranny they were not acting in terms of roles assigned by the experimenters, but instead had *rejected* those roles and adopted new ones. When they sought to advance the goals of a tyrannical group this was therefore an *active choice* that reflected high levels of identification with the group and its mission. Related to this point, it was also the case that there was *variation* in participants' enthusiasm for this tyrannical solution, and that those who were most enthusiastic were the participants who had been most authoritarian at the study's outset. In line with data from the SPE and RPB 101, individual differences do therefore appear to be implicated in the development of tyranny. Significantly, though, it is apparent that in the BPS individuals did not exert a stable level of influence on events – in part because their personal psychology was transformed and *given meaning* by emergent group dynamics. Amongst other things, this meant that authoritarian participants were only in a position to express and advance their authoritarian ambitions once they had been galvanized by a sense of shared identity that had both steeled them and drawn more moderate individuals to their cause.

All this suggests that tyranny arises neither from disposition nor situation alone, nor even from a mechanical interaction between these elements. Instead it arises from a *dynamic interactionism* in which individuals who are inclined towards tyranny (in part as a result of prior group experience) come to exert influence over others (and therefore over events) only when they come to represent a shared social identity and are able to exercise *leadership* on that basis (Haslam and Reicher, 2007). It was these processes that allowed particular leaders to come close to tyranny in the BPS, and it was these same processes that allowed Zimbardo and some of his guards to create tyranny in the SPE. And while the SPE leaves us with unanswered questions about what would motivate a leader to promote tyranny in the way that Zimbardo did in his guard briefing, a strength of the BPS is that it gives us some insight into the social and historical dynamics that take groups and their leaders down this path.

CONCLUSION

The Stanford Prison Experiment is rightly recognized as a classic study in social psychology. Fundamentally, this is because it provides powerful testimony of the capacity for people who have reasonable claims to be considered normal, decent and civilized to perpetrate acts that are abnormal, indecent and uncivilized. In the falsificationist tradition which points to the power of a single case to demand a major rethinking of established wisdom, it remains a trump card that can be played to counter arguments that tyranny is perpetrated only by those who

have strong inclinations towards tyranny, or that barbarianism is the preserve only of barbarians. This dispositionalist argument was used to explain brutality in the 1970s, it remains popular today, and it is likely to have continued appeal for the foreseeable future. For this reason the core message of the SPE is unlikely to lose either its appeal or its relevance in the years ahead.

Yet while the SPE provides a strong basis for questioning dispositionalism, it is also the case that in the 40 years since it was conducted researchers have issued major challenges to Zimbardo's staunch situationism. First, close analysis points to ways in which the tyranny observed in the SPE can be explained with reference to methodological features that Zimbardo has tended to overlook or downplay. Second, studies which have revisited the paradigm of the SPE have generated data which suggest that dispositions play a role in drawing people into particular contexts and also in orienting them towards particular group activities once there. Third, a wealth of evidence suggests that in seeking to explain tyranny (both in experiments and in the world at large) we need to move beyond the question of whether it is a product of people's dispositions *or* the situation in which they find themselves, to understand instead how these elements combine. Indeed, even here the evidence takes us beyond the simple suggestion that tyranny is just a question of whether particular people find themselves in particular places. For it appears that the interaction of person and context which leads to tyranny (and also to resistance) is *dynamic* such that, on the one hand, group contexts transform individuals but, on the other, individuals transform contexts, primarily through their capacity to represent, lead and mobilize groups.

The great strength of the SPE is that it throws out a bold invitation to consider these various issues in depth and thereby to advance our understanding of a range of important social processes – not just those that give rise to tyranny, but also those which instigate resistance. Yet in many ways, this has also been the study's great weakness. For not only did the ethical concerns that the study aroused serve to deter researchers from replicating Zimbardo's methods, but so too the stature of the SPE has often deterred those who approach the study from looking beyond the simplistic narrative that Zimbardo provides. When they do, it becomes apparent not only that there is much more to see, but also that there is a lot more that needs explaining.

FURTHER READING

- Haney, C., Banks, C. and Zimbardo, P. (1973) 'A study of prisoners and guards in a simulated prison', *Naval Research Reviews*, September: 1–17. Washington, DC: Office of Naval Research.
- Zimbardo, P. (2007) *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil*. London: Random House.
- This article provides a succinct account of the SPE.
- The world had to wait another 34 years for the extensive account that Zimbardo provided in this 551-page volume. This became an international best-seller and a platform for world-wide publicity largely because it couples an extensive and highly readable account of the SPE with

Graveline, C. and Clemens, M. (2010) *The Secrets Of Abu Ghraib Revealed: American Soldiers on Trial*. Dulles, VA: Potomac Books.

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an analysis of atrocities at Abu Ghraib – drawing on Zimbardo's role as an expert witness at the trial of Ivan Frederick.

Graveline and Clemens were army prosecutors at the same trial. Their 2010 book provides a disturbing account of goings-on in the prison and on this basis they raise questions about the validity of Zimbardo's analysis.

Relatedly, these two papers provide evidence which suggests that demand characteristics and selection biases may have played a role in the SPE's findings.

This article challenges Zimbardo's study on a range of other grounds, in the course of presenting a detailed account of findings from the 2002 BBC Prison Study.

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