



An Introduction to Social Psychology

Dr Zimbardo

Narrator (Vo):

In 1971 Professor Philip Zimbardo and his colleagues conducted an experiment at Stanford University, designed to look at how ordinary men might behave if given the role of guards and prisoners.

Their research was groundbreaking at the time, but it also raised an enormous number of questions for social psychology. The subject matter, outcomes and methods are all of continuing interest to contemporary researchers.

Dr Caroline Kelly:

Zimbardo carried out his study in the aftermath of World War Two, and there was a lot of interest and concern at that time about those events and how that the events of the Second World War could have happened. Also at that time then, the aftermath of Vietnam, and again, a lot of interest in the atrocities that took place in that event and the murder of many civilians by soldiers in that war.

So there was a lot of interest amongst psychologists in, in how the thing could have happened and how ordinary people could have got drawn into those events.

Dr Bianca Raabe:

He was very concerned with the impact of social roles and what they had on the way in which humans behave. And I think he was very concerned with trying to understand the impact of the social context. So I think in terms of his work, he was very much concerned with gearing his research around what happens to people when they take up particular social roles and when they become part of particular social groups.

Caroline Kelly:

At the beginning of this study the prisoners were arrested at their homes by real police officers and were taken off to the local police station.

Now this was not something which they had signed up for and they were surprised, understandably, by this event, and they asked the police officers what was the relationship between this event and their signing up for a psychology study. And the police officers refused to be drawn into this conversation. So this was a very unsettling way of starting the study. Zimbardo brought them to a mock up of a prison which he created in the basement of the psychology department at Stanford University. What he did then was to divide his group into prisoners and into guards. The guards had a guard's uniform and they had sunglasses and they had a stick, and the prisoners wore loose fitting smocks and sandals. Now the prisoners spent 24 hours a day in this mock prison, and the guards came and went doing shifts.

Dr Bianca Raabe:

Part of what he was doing was observing what was going to take place in this particular context and how those roles as either prisoner or guard, how they shaped or sort of changed the way people behaved.

Prof. Zimbardo:

The guards now fell into their job, some of them liked it, some of them disliked it, but it was a job that they did. They gave commands and now what happened is the prisoners followed them.

Guard:

You can give me the blankets and sleep on the bare mattress, or you can keep your blankets and 416 will stay in another day.

Dr Bianca Raabe:

They found ways to punish prisoners if they misbehaved ...

Guard:

Let's see if we can count backwards here ...

Guard:

Let's try that out.

Guard:

Let's see what goes on.

Prisoners:

9 ... 8 ... 7 ... 6 ... 5 ... 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1

Guard:

Oh that's bad!

Guard:

Hey, I don't want anybody laughing.

Caroline Kelly:

It was certainly the case that initially the prisoners did show some signs of disbelief and rebellion about what was happening.

Prisoner:

This is unbelievable! You took our clothes ...

Guard:

Hands off the door.

Caroline Kelly:

But after a fairly short while they fell into their roles, they became very submissive and dependant, very powerless, and obviously showed signs of stress and anxiety and depression.

Prof. Zimbardo:

Things had gotten so bad that we no longer had a group of prisoners. What we had were individuals believing they were prisoners, struggling for individual survival, no longer caring about their other prisoners or their other fellow students.

Caroline Kelly:

Meanwhile the guards got into their roles and the level of violence escalated over a period of days. They began to humiliate and degrade the prisoners and find every opportunity to exert their power and influence over the prisoners.

Prof Zimbardo:

Some of them had prisoners clean out toilet bowls with their bare hands. They now taunt, humiliate, degrade the prisoners in front of each other, and they exert arbitrary control over the prisoners.

Caroline Kelly:

This escalation of aggression was so extreme that after a period of six days the experiment had to be brought to a halt before the scheduled time.

Dr bianca raabe:

I think he showed something that was important at the time, that, and I think it is about that notion that you know, because it's not about who you are internally that matters, it's about the social context in which you find yourself.

Caroline kelly:

Zimbardo was wanting to move away from the idea that we can explain extreme behaviour by reference to individual personality characteristics, and wanting to move instead towards an explanation which focused on social structural factors as an explanation for behaviour.

Dr bianca raabe:

It's about the groups to which you belong and how you take on those group identities, and then in a sense become them. Um, and I think that's what he showed and I think that was such a, a radical way of looking at things at that particular time.

Caroline kelly:

Zimbardo's study had a very important impact on methodological debate and particularly ethical debate in social psychology at the time. This study really pushed at the boundaries of what people felt was acceptable for social psychologists to do with their participants. And indeed, some people felt that he had gone way beyond what was acceptable to do in social psychology experiments.

There was therefore considerable debate following this study and a few other very famous studies, about the ethics of experimentation in social psychology and a much tighter scrutiny following this of the sorts of studies which people were conducting and the guidelines which they were using.

Narrator (vo):

Professor Zimbardo's experiment, like any piece of social psychological research, can be examined to see how power relations are played out -- and to see how knowledge is situated in its historical and cultural context. It can also be analysed by looking at the role of the individual and society or social groups, and to see how people make choices and show agency. Or how social structures determine the outcome of events.