



An Introduction to Social Psychology

The Experiment

Narrator (vo):

In 2001 Professors Alex Haslam and Steve Reicher set up another experimental situation involving men assigned to the roles of guards and prisoners. This experiment was filmed by the BBC.

Prof haslam:

The first thing to say is probably that there are actually a lot of similarities between our studies in terms of the basic set up. So the participants were randomly assigned to condition, to groups as prisoners or guards in a simulated prison environment. I think the first thing to say is actually that aspects of that environment and the general context of the study were different in the sense that whereas in Zimbardo's study he didn't have much eth, or much or any kind of ethical oversight, oversight of the project as a whole, in our study we had an ethical committee on site that was monitoring all aspects of the study and were explicitly there to ensure that we didn't have any of the kind of abuses of the form that were ... were manifested in Zimbardo's study.

Prisoner:

We're not talking about rights, are we? I don't have any rights, I'm in prison. So I am ...

Guard:

You do have rights, they're on the board.

Prisoner:

I know they're all written down, I know ...

Caroline kelly:

Reicher and Haslam were concerned that because of the great ethical debate which took place after Zimbardo's study, there was a feeling that no-one should be allowed to do this sort of study again. And indeed Zimbardo expressed that very view himself. What this meant then was that something of a stop was placed on research into this form of extreme behaviour, and Zimbardo's study was really taken as the last word on this sort of behaviour. And this means of course that it's very difficult to develop an academic debate about the causes of extreme behaviour because there is such a small amount of research on which to base that debate.

Prof haslam:

In Zimbardo's study he had taken on the role as prison superintendent, and indeed as part of that role he had said to his guards: we're going to do this, that and the other to the prisoners. We're gonna take away their individuality, we're gonna treat them very badly and blah, blah, blah. So he, if you like, invited them to engage in abuse.

Dr bianca raabe:

I think there's always issues about the relationship between researchers and their participants. Researchers can be seen to be very much in control of the situation. They have the power to control through the manipulation of variables and the like, particularly in an experimental context. However, I think the climate has changed in the sense that I think now that power is not that straight forward. The power relationship isn't that clear cut any more. And I think that the process becomes, because of the ethical dilemmas that were raised by Zimbardo's research, the relationships become much more one of negotiation around power. But, nevertheless, as a researcher, you are in a powerful position.

Steve reicher:

What we are exploring is the way in which people act within a system ...

Guard:

And the system can't be changed.

Steve reicher:

The system is one in which we are interested in the most effective way in which you, the guards, run the system and the system in which there are differences between what people are doing.

Prof haslam:

When people think about the Stanford Prison experiment, if you look in textbooks, a lot of the space is devoted to discussion of the ethical issues. Those are very important. But one of the things is that people had spent so much time discussing ethics they'd never really said well, it's a bit like a Trojan horse, that they'd done that, they'd debated the ethics and said oh yes, it was problematic, blah, blah, blah, but they said: oh but, but it generated this really important theoretical finding.

Now I think the findings are important, but in a way all this debate about ethics had not led to the appropriate scrutiny of the theoretical conclusions of the research. And actually, as I've said, I, we think that those conclusions were simply wrong.

Caroline kelly:

Whereas in Zimbardo's study the guards really exerted their authority over the prisoners in all sorts of ways. In the later study it was actually the prisoners who bonded together as a group and became quite aggressive and quite intimidating towards the guards.

Prisoner:

You're a guard, you can't be arguing with us.

Guard:

It's not an argument, I'm telling you, please stop talking.

Prisoner:

This, this is my point, you can't be there telling me nothing.

Guard:

I can tell ...

Prisoner:

No way, mate.

Guard:

Yeah. That's the way it works. That's how the guard/prisoner relationship works.

Prisoner:

So what, so you can come in here ...

Guard:

Try and see with wide lines ...

Prisoner:

...
you can come here and tell me what to do?

Guard:

Look, you, you play the game with me, you just walk off, and you don't expect me to do fuck all about it? Come on.

Prisoner:

Exactly, you've got the asshole, haven't you? You've got the asshole.

Prisoner:

...not being funny, but that is totally out of order. You cannot be a guard in that uniform and use foul language to us.

Caroline Kelly:

The guards by contrast actually seem quite uncomfortable with their role in the higher status authority position, and seemed very reluctant to want to use the authority which they had. In fact, relations deteriorated between the groups to the extent that the whole system itself in the prison was called into question.

Guard:

I think you've just got to ... I think we've got to ask ourselves this one question, but don't do anything about it right now, but keep it at the back of your mind: does it have to be like this? Does it have to be prisoners and guards with rules?

Dr Bianca Raabe:

We live in a different climate where, um, issues around authority are not that clear cut. Our relationship with authority isn't as straight forward as perhaps it was in the 1970s.

Prisoner:

This isn't a prison.

Guard:

It is.

Prisoner:

At the moment it's not a prison.

Guard:

It is.

Prisoner:

At the moment ...

Guard:

How do you know?

Prisoner:

I'm telling you.

Guard:

I'm telling you as a guard, I've been here longer than you. How do you know?

Prisoner:

I'm telling you ... I'm telling you exactly what I know.

Guard:

You don't ...

Prisoner:

At them moment this isn't a prison.

Guard:

It is.

Prisoner:

At the moment this is part of an experiment which I'm participating in.

Guard:
Right.

Prisoner:
When I've got all the of rules, then I'll tell you whether or not it's a prison. Do you understand?

Guard:
Fine.

Prisoner:
He is good, he is good. And he's on our side, boys.

Prisoner:
You've got a live one here!

Caroline Kelly:
Zimbardo's study was conducted in America. Reicher and Haslam's study was conducted in Britain. So we have historical and cultural differences between these two studies.

Narrator (vo):
Since the 1970s there have been tremendous cultural changes. For example, in attitudes towards authority, in notions of civic responsibility, and in the way that reality is portrayed on TV.

Dr Bianca Raabe:
The study in itself was televised, and I think that has to change the shape and the nature of, of what was going on and how those people who are involved in it understood what was happening to them. That certainly wasn't what was happening with Zimbardo's study. We didn't have reality television in that sense.

Caroline Kelly:
If we think about the participants in these studies, they were asked to carry out a rather strange procedure, they were asked to play the role of prisoners and guards. Now how would people make sense of that task? How would they know what it means to be a prisoner or to be a guard? Well one way in which they would make sense of the task is to draw on shared understandings in the culture about what prisoners are like and what guards are like. And it's very likely that there was some very important differences in those cultural understandings between the two studies in terms of the history and the surrounding culture.

Dr Bianca Raabe:
From Zimbardo's position it was very much that taking on the social roles, the social roles themselves, were the determining factor if you like. Whereas I think in the Reicher/Haslam research there was a much clearer example of agency, people being able to act in ways to change their situation.

Caroline Kelly:
There were some very clear individual differences in both of these studies. In Zimbardo's study we saw one particular guard who seemed to be particularly aggressive in his behaviour towards the prisoners.

Guard:
I'll ask you again - why should I give you a pillow?

Prisoner:
Because I'm asking you for one, Mr Correctional Officer.

Guard:

But you didn't get around to working till about ten minutes after everyone else did.

Guard:

... see in the future that you do work when you're told.

Prisoner:

Thank you, Mr Correctional Officer,

Guard:

Thank him real sweetly because I'm sure that sounded very nasty.

Prisoner:

Thank you, Mr Correctional Officer.

Guard:

Say it again.

Prisoner:

Thank you Mr Correctional ...

Guard:

Say bless you, Mr Correctional Officer.

Guard:

Bless you, Mr Correctional Officer.

Caroline Kelly:

In Reicher and Haslam's study we saw one of the prisoners who seemed to emerge in a sort of leadership role.

Guard:

... i think you should sit down with us as well, cos you're taking the head ...

Prisoner:

Well I'm not taking the head, I'm just gonna make a few rules that I think we all should abide by, and you can tell me to fuck off afterwards, I don't mind. So hear me out.

Guard:

Well you see, we've got to have democracy here.

Prisoner:

I know that. But you can't have democracy unless you've got rules to follow.

Guard:

The only reason I say that is because we can see how things kick off when the positions are assumed at the beginning.

Prisoner:

The thing is, I'm not being undemocratic, I'm just trying to set some basic rules for you gentlemen to talk and argue between yourselves, so.

Guard:

Okay.

Caroline Kelly:

So here we can see the intersection between what we bring to our social roles, our background, our experiences, our personalities, and the way in which those personal characteristics intersect with social roles. We choose to play out our social roles in slightly different ways according to what we bring to the role.

Prof Haslam:

Where Zimbardo was interested in showing how groups create tyranny, okay, what we wanted to show too was that groups are also a basis for resistance, which we think is an important message associated with the social identity approach and which tends to have been neglected in this view which has been handed down since Zimbardo, that groups are bad. Actually we don't think groups are bad, sometimes they are, but they're not always. And actually groups can be a very important source for good because actually they provide a critical mechanism to not only create tyranny but also importantly to resist tyranny.

Guard:

I'll stay if it's a commune, where we have individual tasks and we're all accountable to the group. I'm gonna go if we get a really autocratic official with leaders and all that, I'm gonna go.

Prisoner:

But there are gonna have to be rules. Cos there's always gonna be rules.

Guard:

Oh yeah. Oh there's rules, and we can sit down and we can discuss those rules. And if people come to the forefront when discussing those rules, then fair enough.

Prof Haslam:

What we found was that actually, and where the two ... after the prisoners had overthrown the guards' regime and a commune had been set up, it was where that group failed, where that group started to fail that people moved towards tyranny.

Prisoner:

Tomorrow, at first dawn, we're having a military takeover of the regime that's been put in place yesterday.

Prof Haslam:

In fact the guards, their failure had already led to them, if you like, moving to more kind of authoritarian solutions. But in the study as a whole then, the shift towards tyranny, the shift to authoritarianism was not a product of being placed in given roles as members of groups that had power, actually the guards never displayed that natural tendency. They were very ambivalent about their role. Where tyranny emerged, it was a product of group and a response to group failure, okay. So Zimbardo's view is that groups lead naturally to abuse. We're saying actually group failure is much more likely to create the conditions under which people will turn to authoritarian solutions and tyranny, or at least be willing to accept it or tolerate it in particular kinds of ways.

Voice:

The experiment is about to end.

Narrator (Vo):

Concerned at the turn of events, Alex Haslam and Steve Reicher intervened and called the experiment to a halt, 36 hours before it was due to end.

Prof Haslam:

The simple message groups are bad and that we automatically abuse power is actually misleading in the extreme. And I think our study demonstrates both the limitations of that at a theoretical level, but I hope also opens up this debate for other researchers, for students, so they can say well no, it's not that straight forward, it's more complicated.