

Video Guide

THE STANFORD PRISON STUDY

30 minutes, bw, 1971

The bloodshed and violence inside Attica, San Quentin, and other prisons has forced the nation to ask whether prison life in America today can avoid brutalizing both inmates and their guards. Rather than going to a real prison and observing prisoners, Philip Zimbardo, an experimental social psychologist at Stanford University, decided to do a psychological study by building his own prison and creating some of the psychosocial pressures which occur in prisons. Zimbardo's subjects were eighteen normal college males who volunteered to spend fourteen days in a mock but grimly realistic prison. Half of the men were randomly assigned to be guards and half were assigned to be prisoners. Extensive psychological testing and interviews indicated that there were no psychological differences between the guards and the prisoners prior to the study.

Here are some questions to focus your viewing of the presentation.

1. What procedures were used to make the prisoners lose their identity?
2. What was done to make the guards feel more like guards?
3. How was the rebellion on Monday put down?
4. How did the guards break down prisoner solidarity? (very interesting).
5. What problem occurred on Monday that Zimbardo had not anticipated?
6. How did the guards handle the visit of the parents?
7. How was the rumor of the prison break handled?
8. What happened to Zimbardo as head of the prison? What happened to the ex con who was the prison consultant?
9. What psychological differences appeared between the guards and the prisoners?
10. How long did the experiment last?

Here are some more general questions to consider after viewing the presentation.

1. How do you explain the changes that took place in the prisoners?
2. How do you explain the changes that took place in the guards?
3. What forms of power did the guards have over the prisoners?
4. What is identity? Is there a core of identity which is independent of circumstances?
5. Should this experiment have been done? If you were the experimenter, when would you have stopped this experiment?
6. Have you had any experience in any way like those described in this experiment?
7. What did you learn from this research?
8. What questions were raised that you think should be studied in future research?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Describe your answers to any ten of the 18 questions listed above.