

My Unyielded Dangerous Power

Below is a look into how I perceived a guard would have felt during the experiment. I chose to write from the perspective of an extreme guard to show the extent that these normal men fell into their roles. I intended to capture the sense that he knew what he was doing was wrong, but could not stop himself, a truly intriguing concept that I found consistent among almost all of the guards in their reflections. They did not know the harm they were able to produce when given power.

First Impressions

Sunday August 14, 1971

Today I reported to my job of being a prison guard in a psychological experiment. I was given a khaki uniform, mirrored sunglasses, a whistle, a club, a little direction as how me and the other 8 guards were to do our job. Warden David Jaffe simply told us to keep order in the prison, gain respect of the prisoners, and that we weren't allowed to physically harm them. We weren't given any training. I had no clue how to go about controlling 8 men my age, but I hoped the other guards did so this experiment wouldn't be a bust. While we sat waiting for the prisoners to arrive, I noticed how similar we all looked. From small talk they seemed even more like me, nice college guys looking for a little extra cash before school starts again in the fall. We all laughed about how easy the money was, and how thankful we were to be the guards and not the prisoners.

There was a bit of an awkward tension though when the prisoners did arrive. We were all a little unsure of how to go about our job. Thankfully one of the guards took initiative in making a process for checking them in. One stripped them and searched them, and I deloused them. For the first prisoner it was strange. I worried they would insist they didn't have lice and refuse to let me do my job and check. It took a little force, but I managed to get the prisoner to comply with me. I felt through his sweaty greasy hair, saw no signs of lice, and then shoved the stocking cap over his head. By the third prisoner this was like second nature to me, ritualistic. I

wasn't even thinking about it, I just did. I felt a sense of accomplishment. I had already gained control of them. This was going to be an easy job. When I had checked all the prisoners I watched them shuffle down the line to gather their uniform, unaccustomed to the new chain attached to their ankle. The rest of the day was uneventful for me. I was assigned tomorrow's morning shift, so now the other guards and I are relaxing in the guard room.

Quelling the Rebellion
Monday August 15, 1971

While I was getting ready for my first shift as a guard this morning, one of the night shift guards came sprinting in. He was screaming at us. I don't even remember what he said, but I could hear the panic in his voice so I grabbed my club and ran after him. The prisoners had staged a revolt. I heard clanging and saw that they had pushed their cots up against the cell door to barricade themselves in. I saw their stocking caps and numbers laying on the floor and I became furious. How could they act like this? They had done something wrong, that's what got them here. While I ran towards the closest cell I realized this was also the night shifts fault. Surely they hadn't been strict enough with them. They didn't stop this from happening. They didn't scare them enough. Enforce their authority enough. Something needed to change to reestablish the order in this prison I saw yesterday. By now I was inside the prisoners cell, forcing his cap back onto his head and his number back onto his uniform as he screamed and kicked with rage. He didn't stop. I stripped him naked and he began to hurl insults at me. I knocked him to the floor and grabbed a fire extinguisher, but the cold sprays didn't stop him either. I was now livid. I grabbed him and dragged him out. I didn't know where I was taking him at first, but then I did. His screams of rebellion turned to whimpers and pleas of mercy when I threw him in the hole. I told him he deserved it and slammed the door shut. I don't even know if he has been let out yet.

When I got back to the row of cells I saw guards making prisoners clean up their mess, forcing them into their cells for the rest of the day, and some doing push-ups. There were some guards who had shown up that I didn't even recognize from the day before. But they were doing their job now, keeping order. I was almost embarrassed of how many guards, the ones with authority and clubs, it took to quell the rebellion. With all the prisoners in their cells, I gathered the guards. I explained how ashamed I was feeling and how we couldn't always have all the guards on watch. We needed another way to control them. A psychological way. I decided we should have cells for good prisoners and cells for bad prisoners. I suggested letting them keep their rights to a bed, washing, their uniform, and food, and have them flaunt it in front of the prisoners with nothing. It was genius. My first shift comprised of making some of the prisoners feel special, and the rest feel like bad prisoners. The rest of the day passed without opposition from what I heard, but I would have to wait until my next shift to see what was happening.

The Escape Plan

Tuesday August 16, 1971

This morning's shift could not have been more different than yesterday's. I walked in expecting chaos-- yelling, crying, cursing-- but there was silence. The mood of the entire prison had shifted. It was not us against the prisoners, it was us in charge of the prisoners. I controlled when they went to the bathroom, if I even let them. I jostled those whose faces bothered me. I'd force them out of their cells to do push ups, or simply to make them call out their numbers. I took special interest in 5401, the instigator of the rebellion, and made sure he suffered enough. I guess he had been brought out of the hole sometime last night.

The rest of the morning we made the prisoner's clean their cells, and permitted them to shower and shave. The warden explained that visitors were coming later this afternoon, and the prison needed to look orderly and their boys needed to look as close to normal as possible. I had to register each visitor

that came in. Everything was strictly regulated, they needed to understand they were not popping in for a quick visit, they were in our prison. After I checked them in, I was heading to my room when I overheard two prisoners discussing a mass escape after the visits. I was angrier than I was after the rebellion. I ran to the warden to alert him. I explained that I had heard that 8612 was bringing a mass of people to help the prisoners escape, that he had faked his symptoms to be released yesterday. He sent me to keep an eye on the cells, and within an hour I was sent to clean out a holding room for them. All of us guards gathered up the prisoners, chained them together, put bags over their heads, and led them to this room. I knew most of them had no idea what was happening, but I couldn't stop myself from blaming them. I screamed at them. I wanted to kick them. Writing this now I don't know why I felt so much anger towards them, but I just couldn't stop myself from hating them.

The break was a rumor, and we were all mad. We had spent so much time preparing and nothing even happened. I went to the guard room bitter, and hoped that the night time guards would punish them.

Psychological Approaches and Priests

Wednesday August 17, 1971

This morning there was a more hostile environment in the prison than ever before. There was also a noticeable rift between the prisoners themselves. They all looked isolated. They were no longer bound by any trust. Another guard explained to me in passing that the evening shift guards had found a way to further control them. They decided to swap some of the "good" and "bad" prisoner's. I loved it. The prisoner's had just gotten accustomed to the hierarchy within them, and now everything was reversed. They couldn't trust fellow "good" or "bad" prisoners. They couldn't trust anyone after rumors of the escape. And they couldn't trust us. We had finally gotten complete control. They obeyed everything we told them to do, with no hesitation. To keep myself entertained I would force the prisoners to stand forever for roll call, or make them do push ups. Sometimes I would even stand with my foot on their back as they did them. It

was horrible, but it seems not real to me, so I can't even stop myself.

This afternoon I covered a guards shift because he had to help with the priest that came to visit the prisoners. About halfway through I saw prisoner 819 leave sobbing without his chain or cap. He must be trying to get released. In a split second, I decided to turn the prisoners against each other again. I had to make 819 feel bad for getting released. I made them all line up and chant "819 is a bad prisoner! We are being punished because of you 819!" Within seconds I heard his sobs return. I laughed. I had such control over their emotions. The other two guards looked at me with disgust. They were very different than me. Before I could see what happened, Warden Zimbaro grabbed him and took him away. He was released that night.

A Trip to the Hole

Thursday August 18, 1971

An easy morning shift. I was unhappy with the smell of the prison, so I forced them to wash their cells and clean out their pots of pee. The guards are supposed to let them clean it at the end of each shift, but I could tell from the smell the night guards had forgotten. That meant they must've allowed them to go to the bathroom. The thought of some of the guards not being as harsh on the prisoners as they needed to be irritated me. It was like they were undoing my hard work. My time spent turning them against each other, my time making them feel they had done something wrong, and most importantly my time spent getting them to respect our authority. I considered taking action, but then I had to get the prisoners ready to see the parole board. I took my anger out on them. I dragged them each out of their cells, let the rule of no physical harm slip, and kicked them into a line where I chained them together and put bags over their heads. They were going to meet to discuss terms of parole. These men did not deserve it. I marched them there and went on my break.

Because some of the guards still needed to be with those waiting to hear about parole, I got sent to work the last half

of the afternoon shift. There was another act of rebellion. Prisoner 416 was refusing to eat. He had only been in the prison since yesterday night, and clearly did not understand how things worked here. I set out to show him. The guards told me they had tried to force feed him, and even got the prisoners to try and feed him, but nothing worked. So, I decided to punish the other prisoners if he wouldn't eat. He persisted, so I persisted. It was causing me no harm. I threatened to cancel visiting hours that evening if he didn't eat. He still didn't eat. Then my plan worked. The prisoners rebelled. Against him, not me. I had turned them against themselves. We dragged him to the hole to calm the other prisoners. Just to prove my power and accomplishment to myself, I struck a deal with the prisoners. 416 could come out of the hole if they gave up their blankets. Unanimously, they did not. He stayed in the hole all night.

The End

Friday August 19, 1971

The experiment is over. It has only been 6 days. Warden Zimbardo saw how pathological the prisoners were acting. I had quite frankly almost forgotten it was an experiment. He gathered all of us guards and informed us that he was ending the experiment because it was no longer just an experiment. He also told us we were going to have to all meet together to discuss how the simulation made us feel. I felt sick to my stomach. I could not face all of these men I had tortured so strategically. These men were so similar to me, yet I had treated them so different because of our roles. I kept quiet during the meeting, but hated myself because I knew I was one of the guards who acted "sadistically" that they kept mentioning. Listening to prisoner 416's recount of his night in the hole, the place I left him, made me shutter. The prisoners all felt worthless, alone, scared. They weren't treated as human beings. I'm not sure how I will live with myself knowing what I am capable of.¹²

¹ Philip Zimbardo et al., "The Stanford Prison Experiment," in *The Stanford Prison Experiment*, ed. Philip G. Zimbardo Inc, [Page #], PDF.

² "A Pirandellian Prison." *New York Times* (New York, New York), 1923-Current File

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