

Emily Smith
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The Stanford Prison Experiment: The Basis of an Ongoing Movement

The Stanford Prison Experiment was a famous 1971 psychological study, whose revolutionary results are still being studied and questioned in the world of psychology today. Professor Zimbardo, the professor who conducted the experiment, set out to determine the effect of confinement on one's mind and wellbeing, as well as the difference between the actions of guards and those imprisoned, and their relationship in terms of how their actions affect the others. The men assigned to be the prisoners were dehumanized in every way possible as they entered the fake prison, and then the professors allowed human nature to grasp hold of the situation. The results of this experiment horrified them, and the intended two week experiment was shut down after five days. The experiment had unearthed the basis of human nature, good and evil. In a matter of days, the prisoners were acting pathological and some of the guards had abused their powers in ways that questioned the humanity of the experiment, but what did it show the world? First, it forced the world to accept that the outcome of the experiment could answer the world's oldest question: Are humans naturally good or evil? This experiment concluded that an innocent human will knowingly continue to cause pain on another innocent human. If people are not evil, why do people do horrible things, seemingly with no motivation? The Stanford Prison Experiment brought humanity back into question and forced society to react to the results.

The question of good versus evil has been debated amongst psychologists for centuries. Opinions on whether a man's desire for power is born with him or is shaped by society have

always fluctuated with time. The argument stemmed from the ideological differences in Thomas Hobbes and John Locke's belief in human nature. Locke believed that humans are born pure, but that a greedy society corrupts them. Contrastingly, Hobbes thought that men were born selfish and sinful, and that an absolute monarch was needed to control their behavior, and expressed his opinions in his *Leviathan*. His writings portrayed the need for a social contract--between a government and the citizens-- for a peaceful world, as without one there would be "Sedition, Sicknesse; and Civill War, Death," because of the inherent evil in men.¹ He described human nature as "a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death."² Psychologists throughout the years have leaned more in the direction of Hobbes view, predominantly driven by the idea that "people are motivated by their morality, as well as by their rational self interest, to pursue power." Sigmund Freud, of the early 1900's, later confirmed Hobbes speculations of human nature, when he explained the question in terms of the reasoning within one's mind. He classified the Id, Ego, and Superego, and demonstrated how each plays a significant role in making a decision. It is commonly accepted that babies are born without fully developed brains, so instinct is what first drives their actions.³ This is the Id. The Ego and Superego develop later, as a means of controlling impulse by using reason, or by acting for moral goals as opposed to personal desires.

¹ Thomas Hobbes, "The Introduction," introduction to *Leviathan* (London, UK: Andrew Crooke, 1651), [Page #], accessed May 21, 2018, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3207/3207-h/3207-h.htm#link2H_4_0001.

² Trudi C. Miller, "The Duality of Human Nature." *Politics and the Life Sciences* 12, no. 2 (1993): 221-41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4235959>.

³ Ibid

Psychology of the mid 1900's was based on Freudian psychology, but psychologists of the time were beginning to experiment with the situations under which to observe human nature. During times of war heinous crimes of man have been reported, such as during the war in the Philippines, but reactions were never measured in a controlled environment.⁴ The first of the famous administered psychological experiments was Stanley Milgram's in 1963. Milgram began to test human nature in specific situations with regards to the controversial Nuremberg Trials, where Nazi's pleaded that they simply followed instructions when carrying out the wicked acts of the Holocaust. He found that two-thirds of his 40 subjects would knowingly continue to cause pain to another innocent human simply because they were instructed to.⁵ Inspired by Milgram's outcomes, Philip Zimbardo designed the Stanford Prison Experiment, as he wanted to further explore the idea of the balance of the Id, Ego, and Superego in situations, and specifically desired to determine "where the role ends and identities begin" in the situations.⁶ His experiment would be a test of "doubling," or the idea that everything does depend on the situation, which was the driving question behind Milgram's Experiment.⁷ He stated, "we sought to understand more about the process by which people called "prisoners" lose their liberties, civil rights,

⁴ Meredith Mason Brown. "A Killing in the Philippines, 1900: A Kentuckian Faces Insurgency and Military Justice." *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 104, no. 1 (2006): 43-76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23386735>.

⁵ Walter Sullivan, "65% in Test Blindly Obey Order to Inflict Pain." *New York Times* (1923-Current File) October 26th, 1963. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/116350807?accountid=6603>

⁶ Zimbardo, Philip, Craig Haney, W. Curtis Banks, and David Jaffe. "The Stanford Prison Experiment." In *The Stanford Prison Experiment*, edited by Philip G. Zimbardo Inc, 1-26. PDF.

⁷ Daniel Goleman, "The Torturer's Mind: Complex View Emerges." *New York Times*. May 14th, 1985. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/111245944?accountid=6603>

independence, and privacy, while those called “guards” gain social power by accepting the responsibility for controlling and managing the lives of their dependent charges”.⁸ Zimbardo had no clue just how important his experiment would be for psychology, and how it would inspire a movement. A movement towards the direly needed prison reform.

In the 1970’s most prisons were despicable places full of torture, murder, rape, and segregation. The Mississippi State Penitentiary [Parchman] was all of this and worse. It had a reputation for being a horrible place to be imprisoned. In the 1970’s, this prison was one of many around the country taken to court over failing to protect not only their guaranteed Constitutional rights, but the prisoner’s lives as well. The issues were made apparent when prisoners refused to continue “to be abused without protest,” and when a civil rights lawyer, Roy Haber, litigated the unconstitutionality of the conditions. Parchman used the inmates as slaves and they worked tirelessly to farm cash crops for the government to profit. The guards worked them all day, to the point of exhaustion. These men, with little training, also terrified inmates through physical punishment, solitary confinement, by shooting at them, and by torturing them in any other way they found amusing.

Attorney Roy Haber claimed in court that “Parchman need now to turn to rehabilitation... it needs employees who are ‘committed to restructuring a human life instead of committed to getting in another crop’”.⁹ Luckily, one prison in the 1970’s believed in this principle of

⁸ “A Pirandellian Prison.” (1973, Apr 08). *New York Times (1923-Current File)* Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/119622795?accountid=6603>

⁹ Roy Reed, “Pressure Mounts for Prison Reform in Mississippi.” *New York Times (1923-Current File)*. 1972. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/119470881?accountid=6603>

protecting civilians guaranteed rights and helping them mend their lives. The Patuxent Institution for Defective Delinquents followed through with the promises almost every prisoner hears some version of. Even the men in the experiment heard them: “All of you have shown you are unable to function outside the real world for one reason or another-- that somehow you lack the responsibility of a good citizen of this great country. We are going to help you learn what your responsibilities as citizens of this country are.”¹⁰ The men in the experiment and in most prisons learn nothing but that society does not see them as men anymore, and that they will never be able to fix the part of their life they destroyed. This prison works closely with each inmate, treating them almost as a patient as they work together to discover what part of their life led them down the path to prison. The psychiatrist there, Dr. Boslow, said “I think to a certain extent we are acting on the role of a Superego, which means we act as the parent, yes.” Most of the inmates here have “easily detectable pathological home situations,” which means they were raised in an environment where the Ego and Superego could not fully develop, and thus the Id took control. By taking the time and resources to solve these men's issues, they are giving them their lives back, instead of being like the other prisons who take prisoners lives, deeming them as unworthy to have one. When asked what he thought held society together, Boslow replied, “Love... the need for the regard and esteem of one’s fellow men.” His statement is thoroughly consistent with his views. If men are fueled with nothing but hate in prison, when they are released, society will suffer because of this inability to rehabilitate them. The Patuxent’s approach to rehabilitation proves that environment is very much a factor in one’s behavior. Unfortunately,

¹⁰ “A Pirandellian Prison.” (1973, Apr 08). *New York Times (1923-Current File)* Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/119622795?accountid=6603>

this prison was a one of a kind place for this time, but the results of the Stanford Prison Experiment brought forth the question of how prisoners were being treated, and ultimately helped launch the Prison Reform Movement as other prisons began to follow the Patuxent's approach to rehabilitation.

After the Stanford Prison Experiment concluded, Zimbardo had two significant takeaways from his experiment that he directed towards society so that legal action, and hopefully change, could take place. In an interview he said,

“Normal, healthy, educated young men could be so radically transformed under the institutional pressures of a “prison environment.” If this could happen in so short time, with the excesses that are possible in real prisons, and if it could happen to “cream-of-the-crop” of American youth, then one can only shudder to imagine what society is doing both to the actual guards and prisoners who are at this very moment participating in that unnatural “social experiment””.¹¹

His other key finding was that “In most prison systems, “real” guards are not given much more psychological preparation or adequate training than this for what is one of the most complex, demanding, and dangerous jobs our society has to offer.” What Zimbardo is proposing with these two ideas is that prisons are beyond conceivably horrible. His experiment, which replicated prison life with those who would be considered respectable and important in the society at the time, had to be shut down after only five days due to the pathological and sadistic behaviors that arose so sharply amongst these seemingly normal men. He questioned his own ethicality for putting them through it. Zimbardo discovered that no one is immune to human nature, and that situations do severely impact how one behaves.

¹¹ Ibid

The experiment's shocking conclusions were soon garnered by those already pressing for prison reform. The unrest within American society from race riots and the Counterculture of the 1960's, Vietnam protests and the hippie movement in the 1970's, and the nation's general desire to reject the conformity of the 1950's seemed to spill over into every aspect of life. Within a month of the experiment concluding, one of the deadliest prison riots in American history broke out at the Attica Prison in New York. Over 2,000 prisoners took 42 staff members hostage, revolting in hopes of better living conditions, and even the faint chance of being treated as a human being. But with the sting of failure, many people "abandoned the idea of prison as a tool for rehabilitating prisoners," and began to once again view prisons as a place where prisoners were solely punished for their crimes. But, while the revolt was largely unsuccessful immediately, it provided a platform for politicians and reformers to act on. Prison reform groups were pushing for determinate sentences, "or a defined period of time to be imprisoned rather than a range of months or years".¹² With the desire to gain control of the prison system again, the United States government agreed and passed these new national laws. Media reports of the riot had lashed out at politicians for being "determined to preserve the state's reputation for toughness without worrying much about human lives," and agreeing with reformers about sentence length was their way of addressing the prisoners lives.¹³ But the government yearned for complete authority over the system, and thus took control too far. In the 1980's Nixon and

¹² "The Prison Reform Movement." American Social Reform Movements Reference Library. Encyclopedia.com. (April 21, 2018).
<http://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/prison-reform-movement>

¹³ Bryce Nelson, "Attica." New York Times (1923-Current File) December 17th, 1972.
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/119549562?accountid=6603>

Reagan's "War on Drugs" policy reversed any progress of public opinion that was shifting towards making prisons a true place of rehabilitation. Any aspirations for another chance at life. Any hope for reform, now crushed.

The policy exponentially increased the problems prisons were already facing by enforcing stricter drug laws and sentences. After this policy change, the effects snowballed into a problem larger than the one before, a problem America still faces today. Beginning in the 1980's and up through the late 1990's, the number of inmates mushroomed and nearly quadrupled from before, and at the same time resources were stretched even thinner, leaving prisoners in unsafe and unsanitary conditions. The overcrowding led to increased violence amongst inmates, the emergence of high sexual assault rates, and even the spread of new deadly epidemics such as AIDS. The turmoil within led to even more strife outside. Some state governments tried to hire private companies to solve the problem, but it has only widened the divide as activists are concerned that these companies only have their personal profit at mind, and not the rights of the prisoners. But the fear of what's happening inside greatly influences the minds of the public. They see and hear the horrendous things inmates do to one another, and rightfully so, want to keep those they perceive as dangerous locked up, so strict rules are implemented. The vicious cycle continues, and the prisoners continue to suffer.¹⁴

Yet the root of the problem stems in Zimbardo's conclusion of the Stanford Prison Experiment. The debate has now become so political and so money centered that the people who are affected are forgotten. These institutions leave those already struggling with complicated

¹⁴ "The Prison Reform Movement." American Social Reform Movements Reference Library. Encyclopedia.com. (April 21, 2018). <http://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/prison-reform-movement>

home situations feeling dehumanized, as if their lives don't matter. The pathological manners with which the prisoners in the experiment were acting in occurred in days, in normal well-off men, proved that situations can alter behavior. In conclusion, the American prisonment system needs a little love, as Dr. Boslow said. With love and the results of the experiment in mind, there are feasible options of how to reform prisons so that they fulfill their purpose of rehabilitation, which will ultimately stop the ongoing cycle many prisoners fall victim to. The results of Philip Zimbardo's infamous Stanford Prison Experiment shaped the Prison Reform movement of the 1970's, but the still revolutionary discoveries of human nature should be revisited to heal this broken country full of hate.

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