

(Slide 01)

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT:
A Simulation Study of the Psychology of Imprisonment
Conducted August 1971 at Stanford University

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On a quiet Sunday morning in August, a Palo Alto, California police car swept through the town picking up college students as part of a mass arrest for violation of Penal Codes 211, Armed Robbery, and Burglary, a 459 PC. The suspect was picked up at his home, charged, warned of his legal rights, spread-eagled against the police car,

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searched and handcuffed; often as surprised and curious neighbors looked on. The suspect was put in the rear of the police car and carried off to the police station,

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the sirens wailing.

The car entered the station, the suspect was removed,

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brought inside the station, formally booked, again warned

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of his Miranda rights, finger printed, and a complete identification

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made. The suspect was then taken to a holding cell

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where he was left blindfolded to ponder his fate and wonder what he had done to get himself into this mess. What he had done was

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to answer an ad a few weeks earlier which appeared in the Palo Alto City newspaper, calling for volunteers for our study of the psychological effects of prison life.

We wanted to see just what were the behavioral and psychological consequences of becoming a prisoner or prison guard. To do this, we decided to set up our own prison, to create or to simulate a prison environment, and then to carefully note the effects of this total institution on the behavior of all those within its walls. Over 70 applicants who answered our ad and were given diagnostic interviews,

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and an extensive battery of psychological tests, administered by graduate students Craig Haney and Curt Banks, which helped us to eliminate any candidates with psychological problems, medical disability or history of crime or drug abuse, until we were left with the final sample of 24 participants. They were college students from all over the United States and Canada who happened to be in the Stanford area during the summer (many having just completed summer school classes at Berkeley or Stanford), and wanted to earn \$15 a day by participating in a psychological study. On all dimensions that we were able to test or to observe, they reacted normally.

Our study of prison life, then, began with an average group of healthy, intelligent, middle-class college males. These boys were arbitrarily divided into two subgroups by a flip of the coin. Half were randomly assigned to be guards, the other to be prisoners. It is important to remember that at the beginning of our experiment there was no difference at all between those boys who were randomly assigned the treatment of being a prisoner or those assigned to be guards.

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In order to better understand the psychology of imprisonment which we were trying to simulate in our study, we called upon the services of experienced consultants. Foremost among them was Carlo Prescott, a former prisoner who had served nearly seventeen years in San Quentin, Soledad, Folsom and other prisons. He made us aware of what it was like to be a prisoner. He also introduced us to a number of other ex-convicts as well as correctional personnel during an earlier Stanford summer school class on "The Psychology of Imprisonment".
that we co-taught.

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Our prison was physically constructed in the basement of Stanford's Psychology Department building. We took the doors off some laboratory rooms and replaced them with especially made doors with steel bars, and cell numbers.

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We boarded up either end of a long corridor. That corridor was “The Yard,” and was the only place outside of the cell where the prisoner was allowed to walk, eat, or exercise, except to go to the toilet down the hallway, which he did blindfolded so as not to know the way out of the prison.

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At one end of the hall was a small opening through which we could videotape and record the events that occurred. On one side of the corridor was a small closet which became "The Hole," or solitary confinement. It was dark and very confining, about two feet wide and two feet deep, but in which a "bad prisoner" could stand up.

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An intercom system allowed us to secretly bug the cells to monitor what the prisoners discussed, and also to make public announcements to the prisoners. There were no windows or clocks to judge the passage of time, which later resulted in some time-distorting experiences.

Our jail is now ready to receive its first prisoners,

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who are waiting in the detention cells of the Palo Alto Police Department. Each prisoner, still blindfolded and still in a state of mild shock over the surprise arrest by the city police, is put into a car of one of our staff and driven to our Stanford County Jail for further processing. The prisoners are brought into our jail one at a time

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and greeted by the warden, who conveys the seriousness of their offense and their new status as our prisoners.

Each prisoner is searched and then systematically stripped naked,

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He is then deloused with a spray, to convey our belief that he may have germs or lice –

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as can be seen in this series of photos--a degradation procedure was designed in part to humiliate him, and in part to be sure he isn't bringing in any germs to contaminate

(22)
our jail.

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The prisoner

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is then issued his uniform. It consists of five parts. The main part is a dress, or smock, which each prisoner wears at all times with no underclothes. On the smock, in front and in back, is his prison number, his ID.

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On each prisoner's right ankle is a heavy chain, bolted on and worn at all times. Loosely fitting rubber sandals are on their feet and on their heads, to cover their long hair (recall it is 1971 and everyone had "Hair"),

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stocking caps, a woman's nylon stocking made into a cap which also had to be kept on day and night.

It should be clear that what we were trying to do was to create a functional simulation of a prison environment, not a literal one. [This is an important distinction for you to appreciate and keep in mind.] Real male prisoners don't wear dresses; but real male prisoners, we have learned do feel humiliated, do feel emasculated, and we thought we could produce similar effects quickly by putting men in a dress without any underclothes. Indeed, as soon as some of our prisoners were put in these uniforms they began to walk and to sit differently, and to hold themselves differently, more like a woman than like a man. The chain on their foot, which also is uncommon in most prisons, was used in order that the prisoner always would be aware of the oppressiveness of his environment. So even when a prisoner was asleep he could not escape the atmosphere of oppression. When a prisoner turned over, the chain would hit his other foot, waking him up and reminding him that he was still in prison, unable to escape even in his dreams.

His prison number was one way of making the prisoner feel anonymous. Each prisoner had to be called only by his number and could refer to himself and the other prisoners only by number. The stocking cap on the head was a substitute for having the prisoner's hair shaved off.

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This process of having one's head shaved, which takes place in most prisons as well as in the military, is designed in part to minimize each human being's individuality,

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since some people express their individuality through hair style or length. It is also a way of getting each person to begin to comply with the arbitrary, coercive rules of the institution. The dramatic change in appearance of simply having one's head shaved is obvious in these men.

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The guards were given no specific instruction or training on how to be guards. Instead they were free, within limits, to do whatever they thought was necessary to maintain law and order in the prison and to command the respect of the prisoners for the authority of the guards and the prison staff. The guards made up their own set of detailed rules which they then carried into effect under the general supervision of Warden David Jaffe, also an undergraduate student from Stanford University. They were warned, however, of the potential seriousness of their mission and of the possible dangers in the situation they were about to enter, as, of course, are real guards who voluntarily take such a dangerous job.

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As with real prisoners, our prisoners expected some harassment, to have privacy and some of their other civil rights violated while they were in prison, and to get a minimally adequate diet—as part of their informed consent agreement when they volunteered.

This is what one of our guards looked like.

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All the guards were dressed in identical uniforms of khaki, they carried a big billy club borrowed from the police, a whistle around their neck, and they all wore special sun-glasses, an idea I borrowed from the movie, "Cool Hand Luke." These silver-reflecting sun-glasses prevented anyone from seeing their eyes or reading their emotions, and thus helped to further promote their anonymity. We were, of course, studying not only the prisoners, who were made to feel anonymous, but also the guards as well in the new power-laden roles.

We began with nine guards and nine prisoners in our jail. Three guards worked each of three eight-hour shifts, three prisoners

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occupied each of the three barren cells all the time. The remaining guards and prisoners from our total sample of 24 were on call in case they were needed. The cells were so small that there was room for only three cots on which the prisoners slept or sat, with room for little else.

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At 2:30 a.m. the prisoners were rudely awakened from sleep by blasting whistles for their first or many "Counts." The count served the function of familiarizing the prisoners with their numbers. But more importantly, it provided a regular occasion for the guards to interact with and exercise control over the prisoners. There were several counts every day and night. [As you can hear in the first count on the video tape,] initially the prisoners were not yet completely into their roles and were not taking it too seriously. They were still trying to assert their independence. The guards, on the other hand, were also feeling out their new roles of asserting some authority over their prisoners. This was the beginning of a series of direct confrontations between the team of guards and the group of prisoners.

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Push-ups

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were a common form of physical punishment imposed by the guards to punish infractions of the rules or displays of improper attitudes toward the guards or toward the institution. When we saw the guards doing this, we thought this was an inappropriate kind of punishment in a prison, rather juvenile and a minimal form of punishment. However, we later became aware of the fact that in concentration camps in Nazi Germany,

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push-ups were often used as a form of punishment, as can be seen in this drawing by a former concentration camp inmate, Alfred Kantor. It's curious that one of our guards also stepped on the prisoners' backs while they did enforced push-ups, toward the end of the experiment, or made other prisoners sit or step on the backs of fellow prisoners doing their required push-ups.

Because the first day passed without incident,

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we were surprised and totally unprepared for the rebellion which broke out on the morning of the second day. The prisoners removed their stocking caps, ripped off their numbers and barricaded themselves inside the cells by putting their beds against the door. And now the problem was, what were we going to do about this rebellion? The guards were very much angered and frustrated because the prisoners also began to taunt and curse them personally to their faces. When the morning shift of guards came on, they too were upset at the night shift who, they felt, must have been too permissive and too lenient or else this rebellion would not have taken place. The guards had to handle the rebellion themselves, and what they did was fascinating for the staff to behold.

At first they insisted that reinforcements

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be called in. The three guards who were waiting on stand-by call at home came in and the night shift of guards voluntarily remained on duty to bolster the morning shift (without requesting overtime pay). The guards met and decided to treat force with force.

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They got a fire extinguisher which shot a stream of skin-chilling carbon dioxide and forced the prisoners away from the doors. (The fire extinguishers were present in compliance with the requirement by the Stanford Human Subjects Research Panel, concerned about potential fire threats.)

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The guards broke into each cell, stripped the prisoners naked, took the beds out, forced some of the prisoners, who were the ringleaders of the rebellion, into solitary confinement,

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and generally began to harass and intimidate the prisoners. In part, getting back at them for their personal insults.

The rebellion had been temporarily crushed,

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but now a new problem faced the guards. Sure, nine guards with clubs could put down a rebellion by nine prisoners, but you couldn't have nine guards on duty at all times. It's obvious that our prison budget could not support such a ratio of staff to inmates. So what were they going to do? One of the guards then came up with an ingenious solution. "Let's use psychological tactics instead of physical ones." Psychological tactics amounted to setting up a privilege cell.

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One of the three cells was designated as a "privilege cell." The three prisoners least involved in the rebellion were given special privileges. They got their uniforms back, they got their beds back, they were allowed to wash and brush their teeth. The others were not. They also got to eat special food in the presence of the other prisoners who had lost the privilege of eating. What this amounted to was breaking the solidarity among the prisoners.

After half a day of this treatment, the guards then took some of these "good" prisoners and put them into the "bad" cells, and took some of the "bad" prisoners and put them into the "good" cell, thoroughly confusing all the prisoners. Some of the prisoners who were the ringleaders now thought that the prisoners from the privileged cell must be informers, and suddenly, at a psychological level, there could no longer be any trust or solidarity within each cell. [Our ex-convict consultants later informed us that a similar tactic is used by real guards in real prisons to break prisoner alliance. What is reportedly done is to use the threat of homosexuality to divide the prisoners and also to promote racism which pits Blacks, Chicanos, and Anglos against each other. In fact, in a real prison the greatest threat to any prisoner's life comes from his fellow prisoners. In real prisons, it becomes each prisoner for himself, and rarely do prisoners ever get together to act in unity against the system.] By dividing and conquering in this way, the guards promote aggression between inmates thereby deflecting it from being directed toward them.

In contrast, the prisoners' rebellion played an important role in producing greater solidarity

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among the guards. Because now, suddenly, it was no longer just an experiment, no longer just a simple simulation for the guards. Indeed, here were some trouble-makers who were out to get them, who might really cause them some harm, who had, previously, humiliated them publicly. They were taunting them, teasing, cursing, and the guards were not going to have any more of that shit. Now the guards began to step up even more their control, authority, surveillance, and aggression.

Every aspect

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of the prisoners' behavior fell under the total and arbitrary control of the guards who were on any given shift. To go to the toilet became a privilege which a guard could grant or deny at his whim. Indeed quite often, as the days wore on, a guard might refuse the request of a prisoner to go to the toilet, and after our 10:00 p.m. lock-up when lights were out, the prisoners had to go to urinate or defecate in a bucket which was left in their cell, and on occasion the guard would refuse to allow the prisoners even to empty that bucket. And soon the entire prison began to smell of urine and feces—further adding to the degrading quality of the environment. Also, while escorting a prisoner to the toilet, the guard who was alone with the prisoner, not under the surveillance of the prison Superintendent, nor anyone else, felt free to push, trip, or do anything else he thought necessary to keep the prisoner in line, and also to get back at him personally for having been a trouble-maker.

[We learned later that the guards felt they had to be especially tough on the prisoners when they were off “the yard” in neutral territory in order to maintain their guard role in the absence of situational supports.]

The guards

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were especially tough on the ringleader of the rebellion, prisoner #5401. He was a heavy smoker and they controlled him by regulating his opportunity to smoke. We learned later when we were censoring the prisoners' mail, that he was also a self-styled radical activist. He had volunteered with the idea of exposing our study which he mistakenly thought was an establishment tool to find ways to control student radicals. In fact, he had planned to sell the story to Berkeley's underground newspapers, The Barb and The Tribe, when the experiment was over. However, even he fell so completely into the role of prisoner that he was proud to be elected leader of the Stanford County Jail Grievance Committee, as revealed in this letter to his girlfriend.

Most

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of the grievances of the Grievance Committee which pertained to recreational and rehabilitation activities had to be ignored by staff, of course, until the staff was satisfied that the internal threat to prison security was no longer a menace. On Monday night, in less than 36 hours, we were forced to release our first prisoner.

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Prisoner #8612 was suffering from acute emotional disturbance, disorganized thinking uncontrollable crying, screaming, and rage. In spite of all of this, we had already come to think so much like prison authorities that we thought he was fooling, so to say, trying to "con" us. Prisoner #8612, when interviewed by the Superintendent, said he could no longer stand the harassment by the guards. Prescott chided him for being so weak, and told him what kind of abuse he could expect from the guards and the prisoners if he were in San Quentin prison. He was then given the offer of trading "information" for no further guard harassment. Then he was told to think it over, and he could quit later if he still felt the same way or continue to earn his money without any strain on him. Instead of immediately rejecting this offer to be a "snitch," he returned to his cell and called out to the other prisoners lined up for count, "You can't leave. You can't quit." That sent a chilling message to them all, and directly contributed to creating a sense of really being imprisoned. #8612 then began to "act crazy," to scream, to curse, to go into a rage [as can be heard in the video tape] that seemed out of control. It took quite a while before we could be convinced that he was really suffering (because we did not appreciate the power of this situation), and then Craig Haney decided to release him while Zimbardo and Prescott were away at dinner.

There were two events which highlighted Tuesday.

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The first was visiting hour by parents and friends. Those prisoners who had relatives and friends in the vicinity were allowed to write to them, asking them to come and visit the jail. We were worried that when the parents saw the state of our jail and of their children, they might insist on taking them home. To counter this, we first grossly manipulated the situation, and then we subtly manipulated the visitors. We did the "hypocrisy" trip to make the prison environment seem pleasant to the parents and undercut any complaints the prisoners might present to them. We washed, shaved and groomed the prisoners, had them clean and polish their cells; we removed all the signs,

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fed them a big dinner, played music on the intercom, and even had an attractive former Stanford cheerleader, Susie Phillips, greet the visitors at our registration desk.

When the dozen or so visitors came, full of good humor at what seemed to be a novel, fun experience, we systematically brought their behavior under situational control. They had to be taught that they were “our guests” whom we were allowing the privilege of visiting their sons, brothers, and lovers. They had to register, were made to wait half an hour, were told that only two visitors could see any one prisoner, the total visiting time was cut to only ten minutes [because the prisoners had wasted so much time], they had to be under the surveillance of a guard, and before any parents could enter the visiting area, they had to discuss their son's case with the Warden. Of course, they complained about these arbitrary rules, but remarkably, they did nothing but comply to them. And so they, too, became bit players in our prison drama, being good middle-class adults.

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Indeed, some of the parents got upset when they saw how fatigued and distressed their boy was. But their reaction was to work within the system to appeal privately to the Superintendent to make conditions better for their little prisoner (another rule was to discuss their prisoner's case with the Superintendent before leaving). When one mother told me she did not want to make trouble, but she had never seen her son looking so bad, so exhausted, I responded immediately with the dispositional analysis, to put the blame on him and away from our prison situation. "What's the matter with your boy? Doesn't he sleep well?" This complaining mother said, "I'm sorry; I don't want to make any trouble, but he seems so tired." She was reacting to the authority that I was unconsciously becoming--as Superintendent of the Stanford County Jail. She mentioned the counts, waking them up repeatedly. I countered with its administrative necessity, but I realized that she would make trouble for us. I automatically called upon the Macho schema as I turned to Dad, and asked him, "Don't you think that you boy can handle this?" He bristled, "Of course, he can, he's a real tough kid, a leader." Turning to Mother, he told her, "Come on Honey, we've wasted enough time already." And to me, "See you again at the next visiting time."

The second major event we had to contend with on Tuesday was a rumor of mass escape plot.

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One of the guards overheard the prisoners talking about an escape that would take place immediately after visiting hours. The rumor went as follows: Prisoner #8612 whom we had released the night before was really only faking. What he was going to do was go out, round up a bunch of his friends and they were going to break in right after visiting hours.

How do you think we reacted to this rumor?

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Do you think we recorded a pattern of rumor transmission during the day and waited for the impending escape, and then observed what happened? That was what we should have done, of course, if we were all acting like experimental social psychologists, which is our usual role. Instead, by Tuesday our main concern was to maintain the security of our prison. So what we did in fact was for the Warden, the Superintendent, and one of the chief lieutenants, Craig Haney, to meet and plan our strategy.

First we put an informer (Stanford undergraduate student David Gorchoff)

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in the cell that #8612 had occupied. He was a confederate who was supposed to give us information about the escape plot. Then I went back to the Palo Alto Police Department

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and asked the Sergeant if we could have all our prisoners transferred to their old jail. My impassioned request was turned down only because the City Manager notified the Chief of Police that they would not be covered by their insurance if we moved our prisoners into their jail. Angry and disgusted at this lack of cooperation between our correctional facilities [I was now totally into my role], I left, and we formulated a second plan. The plan was to dismantle our jail immediately after the visitors left, call in our reinforcement guards, take all of our prisoners, chain them,

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put bags over their heads, put them in an elevator, bring the prisoners up to a fifth floor storage room that we had spent several hours cleaning out, and leave all the prisoners in there with the guards until after the anticipated break in. When the conspirators came, I would be sitting there alone. I would tell them that the experiment was over and we had sent all of their friends home, that there was nothing left to liberate. After they left, we'd bring our prisoners back and have more time to redouble the security of our prison. We even thought of luring #8612 back on some pretext and then imprisoning him again because he was released on false pretenses.

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I was sitting there all alone, waiting for the intruders to break in so that we could spring our Machiavellian counter-plot. Instead, who should happen along but one of my colleagues and former Yale graduate student roommate, Gordon Bower, a hard-headed experimental psychologist who, having learned that we were doing an experiment, came to see what was going on. I described only briefly what we were up to because I was anxious to get rid of him, since I thought the intrusion would erupt at any moment. He then asked me a very simple question: "Say, what's the independent variable in this study?" To my surprise, I got really angry at him. Here I had a prison break on my hands. The security of my men and the stability of my prison was at stake and I have to contend with this bleeding-heart, liberal, academic, effete dingdong whose only concern was for a ridiculous thing like an independent variable. The next thing he'd be asking me about was rehabilitation programs, the dummy!

[It wasn't until much later that I realized how far into the experiment I was at that point, that I was thinking like a Prison Superintendent not a research psychologist!]

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The rumor of the prison break turned out to be just a rumor. It never materialized. Imagine our reaction. We had spent one entire day planning to foil the escape, went begging to the Police Department, cleaned up the storeroom, moved our prisoners, dismantled most of the prison, we didn't even collect any data during the entire day. How did we react to this mess? Well, we reacted with considerable frustration, with feelings of dissonance for all the effort we had put in to no avail—and guess who was going to pay for this?

The guards again escalated very noticeably their level of harassment, to the point of increasing the humiliation that they made the prisoners suffer, forcing them to do menial, repetitive work, even to cleaning out the toilet bowls with their bare hands, having the prisoners do push-ups, jumping jacks, whatever the guards could think up,.

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and increasing the length of the counts to several hours each.

On Wednesday

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a strange event occurred which added a Kafkaesque element to our prison. A Catholic priest who had been a prison chaplain in Washington, D.C. was invited down to give me an evaluation of how valid our prison situation was, and also because the Prisoner Grievance Committee had requested church services. He interviewed each of the prisoners individually as I watched in amazement as half the prisoners he spoke to, when he introduced himself, responded by giving their numbers rather than their name. After some small talk he popped the key question: "Son, what are you doing to get out of here?" he asked. Each prisoner, as well as I, responded with puzzlement. And he proceeded to tell each of them that if they didn't help themselves, nobody else would, that they were college students; they were bright enough to realize that they were in prison and that the only way to get out of prison was with the help of a lawyer. If they couldn't afford one, they had to get a Public Defender. He then volunteered to contact their parents if they wanted him to, in order to get some legal aid. Some of them asked him to do so.

The priest's visit highlights the growing confusion between reality and illusion, the increasing permeability of the line between role-playing and self-identity that was gradually taking place in all of us within this prison which we had created, but which now was absorbing us as creatures of its own reality. In real life this man was a real priest. But he had so learned to play the stereotyped, programmed role of the priest, to talk in a certain way, fold his hands in a prescribed way, that he seemed to us to be more a movie version of a priest, a Bing Crosby version, in the movie "Going My Way,"

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than a real priest. And this added to the general level of confusion we were all beginning to feel about our own roles, and where assumed role ends and personal identity begins.

[The prisoners who were most disturbed by the priest's visit were those few who had been able to convince themselves that this was not a "real prison," up to this time.]

The only prisoner who did not want to speak to the priest was prisoner #819 who was feeling sick and had refused to eat and wanted to see a doctor, not a priest. He was persuaded to come out of his cell and talk to the priest and the Superintendent so that we could diagnose what his problem was and what kind of a doctor he needed. While talking to us he broke down and began to cry hysterically, just as had the other two boys we had released earlier with the same symptoms. I took the chain off his foot, the cap off his head, told him to go and rest in the rest and relaxation room that was adjacent to the prison yard. I said that I would get him some food and then go with him to see a doctor. While I was doing this one of the guards lined up all of the prisoners

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and had them chant aloud, "Prisoner 819 is a bad prisoner; because of what prisoner 819 did, my cell is a mess, Mr. Correctional Officer." They shouted this in unison, over and over a dozen times.

As soon as I realized that #819 was hearing all this, I raced back into the room where I had left him, and what I found

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was a boy crying hysterically while in the background his fellow prisoners were yelling and chanting that he was a bad prisoner, that they were being punished because of him. No longer was this a chant or a count, disorganized and full of fun, as we had seen on the first day. It was marked by its conformity, by its compliance, by its absolute unison. It was as if a single voice was saying, "819 is bad." Or like a million Hitler Jugend chanting "Heil Hitler" in a torchlight rally in Berlin. Imagine how he felt!

I said, "OK, let's leave." Through his tears he said to me, "No, I can't leave." He could not leave because the others had labeled him as a bad prisoner. Even though he was feeling sick, he wanted to go back into that prison to prove that he was not a bad prisoner.

At that point I said, "Listen, you are not #819. You are [his name] and my name is Dr. Zimbardo, I am a psychologist not a Prison Superintendent, and this is not a real prison. This is just an experiment, and those are students, not prisoners, just like you. Let's go."

He stopped crying suddenly and looked up at me just like a small child awakened from a nightmare and said, "OK, let's go." It was also clear that what I was doing was convincing myself of the statement I had just made.

On Thursday

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morning the Parole Board met. All prisoners who thought they had a legitimate reason for being paroled could file an appeal for a parole hearing. And the guards prepared reports on why the prisoner was not fit or ready for parole. The prisoners were chained together and brought to the parole board meeting with bags over their heads so that they could not see or talk. They were ushered into the room one at a time. The parole board

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was composed largely of people who were strangers to the prisoners (some departmental secretaries and graduate students) and was headed by our prison consultant Carlo Prescott. Three remarkable things occurred at this parole board meeting. The first was, we asked each prisoner at the end of the hearing, if he would forfeit all the money he had earned up to that time if we were to parole him. Most said yes, they would forfeit all the money they had made if we would parole them. This is dramatic in itself, but less so than the next event. At the end of the board meeting we told each prisoner to go back to his cell and we would consider his request. Every one of them did so docilely. Now realize that what we had made salient to them was their initial experimental contract, that is, they had agreed voluntarily to be prisoners only because they needed the money they would receive for being experimental subjects. If they now no longer wanted the money, then naturally there was no reason or motivation to continue being a subject in this experiment. No one can be imprisoned against his will in an experiment, can he? What they should have said at this point is, "I quit this experiment, and no longer choose to be a subject for money, science, or any other reason." But they did not. They could not because their sense of reality had undergone a transformation. They did not have the power to choose to leave the experiment because it was no longer an experiment in their minds. They were in a prison where the semantic reality was parole, and forfeiting of wages earned for prison work. In this prison only the correctional authority had the power to grant paroles so they could leave.

The third

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significant event of the day was the unexpected way in which our prison consultant went through a complete metamorphosis as head of the parole board. He literally became the most hated authoritarian official imaginable, so much so that when it was over he felt sick at what he had observed himself becoming -- his own tormentor who had previously rejected his parole requests year after year for 16 years when he was a prisoner.

What vicarious learning takes place in prisons where power, authority and control are the chief virtues to be modeled by prisoners?

By this fifth day

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a new relationship had emerged between prisoners and guards. The guards now fell into their job more easily than before. It had become a job which at times was boring and at times was interesting. But it was a long, eight-hour job. The guards could be characterized as falling into one of three groupings. There were the tough but fair guards whose orders were always within the prescribed rules of prison operation. Then there were several guards who were the “good guys” according to the prisoners, who did little favors for them and never punished them. And finally, about a third of the guards were extremely hostile, arbitrary, inventive in their forms of degradation and humiliation, and appeared to thoroughly enjoy the power they wielded when they put on the guard uniform and stepped out into the yard, big stick in hand. None of our personality test scores predicted these extreme differences between the prisoners or guards and their reactions to imprisonment. The only link between personality and prison behavior was the finding of a positive correlation between extent of authoritarianism and number of hours prisoners endured this authoritarian environment—those most authoritarian adjusted most to our prison.

Each prisoner coped with the frustration, absolute sense of powerlessness and growing sense of helplessness and hopelessness in various ways. In the beginning some prisoners coped by being rebellious, even fighting with the guards. One prisoner developed a psychosomatic rash over his entire body when he learned that his parole request had been turned down and we had to bring him to Student Health where he was treated and then released. Four of the prisoners reacted emotionally, breaking down as a legitimate way of passively escaping by having us release them. Some tried to cope with the oppressive situation by being good prisoners, doing everything the guards wanted them to do. One of them was even nicknamed by the other prisoners and guards, “Sarge,” because he was so military in his execution of all commands.

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By the end of the study, the prisoners were disintegrated, both as a group and slowly even as individuals. There was no longer any group unity; just a bunch of isolated individuals hanging on, much as we saw among American prisoners of war in the Korean war, or in hospitalized mental patients. It was clear that the guards had won total control of this prison, that they commanded the respect of each prisoner, or, more accurately, the blind obedience of each prisoner.

However, we did see one final act of rebellion. Prisoner #416 was newly admitted on Wednesday as one of our stand-by prisoners. Unlike the other prisoners who had experienced the gradual escalation of the harassment, hostility and power of the guards, for #416 it was full blown chaos and madness from the first moment he was stripped naked and treated like a dangerous criminal. The other “old timer” prisoners told him that you can’t quit no matter what, that it was a real prison, only one run by psychologists and not by the State.

He tried to cope with the unexpected situation by

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refusing to eat, by going on a hunger strike., to get sick, so that we would be forced to release him. Here was the last futile attempt of a prisoner to assert his individuality by refusing to eat in violation of the rule that prisoners must eat at mealtimes and only at prescribed meal times. The guards tried, but they couldn't get him to do so. Here was a chance for the other prisoners to reorganize and solidify behind this new act of rebellion. What did they do? How did the guards handle this? Well, the guards did everything they could to try to force-feed him. They even tried to get the other prisoners to feed him. They began to punish his cell mates if he wouldn't eat, and finally they even threatened to cut off Thursday night visiting hours, an hour before the visitors came, if #416 didn't eat. The prisoners exploded, not against the guards for this arbitrary rule, but against #416, screaming at him, cursing him, telling him he had to eat, that they weren't going to be inconvenienced by his stupid act of defiance. The guards then threw #416 nearly naked into the hole, solitary, for three hours, although their own rule stated one hour was the limit. Still he refused.

At this point he should have become a hero to the other prisoners. But was he? No. He had become a trouble-maker. And so, the head guard on that shift gave the prisoners a choice. They could have #416 come out of solitary if they were willing to give up some little thing of their own—their blanket. Or, if they refused to give that up, #416 would be left in solitary all night long.

What do you think they chose? Most elected to keep their blankets and let their fellow prisoner suffer in solitary all night. [We intervened later and returned him to his cell.]

This guard, who was the most brutal of all the guards according to the prisoners, was nicknamed by them

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“John Wayne.” It was curious that we learned later from a former Nazi concentration camp inmate, my friend, Professor John Steiner of Sonoma State College in California, that the most notorious guard in the prison near Buchenwald was named “Tom Mix” -- the John Wayne of an earlier generation – because of his “wild West” cowboy macho image in abusing camp inmates.

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Where had our “John Wayne” learned to become such a guard? How could he and others move so readily into that role? How could intelligent normal “ordinary” men become perpetrators of evil so quickly?

Surely it had nothing to do with personality pre-dispositions and much to do with the subtle, pervasive, and insidious power of this social situation.

Equally strange, was the fact that our Informer also now felt such sympathy with his fellow prisoners that he refused to snitch on them, to give us any information -- wasn't that the reason he was put there as a paid confederate? Had these simulated roles become new identities?

These were questions we were forced to face.

On Thursday night

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when the visitors arrived once again, some parents asked me to contact a lawyer in order to get their son out of prison! They said a Catholic priest had called to tell them their son was in the Stanford County Jail, that they should get a lawyer or public defender if they wanted to bail him out. Now our play was being written by playwright Luigi Pirandello, and we were all trapped in our roles. I called the lawyer that they had requested, and indeed the lawyer came down the next day and interviewed each of the prisoners, going through his standard set of prisoner questions about promises and punishments, and so forth -- even though he too knew it was just an experiment.

At this point it became clear that we had to end this experiment. We had indeed created a prison in which people were suffering, in which some boys called prisoners were withdrawing, becoming isolated and behaving in pathological ways. On the other hand, some of the guards were behaving sadistically, delighting in what could be called the "ultimate aphrodisiac of absolute power." Many of the guards who were not behaving that way felt helpless to do anything about it. In fact, they allowed it to go on, never once interfering with an order by one of the cruel guards. It might even be said that it was the good guards who helped maintain the prison, although the bad guards set the tone. That tone became increasingly ugly as guards became bored with the previous night's games they had prisoners play, and invented new activities to demean the prisoners, mostly by having them enact rituals with a sexual, homophobic character. It should be noted also that no guard ever came late for his shift, called in sick, left early, or demanded extra pay for all their overtime work, it was an engaging job with many intrinsic values to them all.

I ended the study prematurely for two reasons:

First, we had learned that the guards were escalating their abuse of prisoners in the middle of the night when they thought no researchers were watching, and the experiment was "off," but our hidden video recorder was on. Their boredom drove them to ever more degrading abuse of the prisoners, ever more pornographic.

Second, Christina Maslach, a recent Ph.D. from our program, who had been my thesis student (and a lovely woman I had recently begun dating), was brought in to conduct interviews with the guards and prisoners, but when she saw our prisoners being marched off to the final toilet run of Thursday night, bags over their heads, legs chained together, hands on each other's shoulders for guidance, she went into an emotional rage. She openly challenged the system by stating,

"It's terrible what you are doing to these boys! She was heroic in this defiance of my authority and my insensitivity to this obvious dehumanization. Not one other person of the many, perhaps fifty or more outsiders, who saw our prison-experiment in action ever questioned what they had observed as immoral, or unethical. Her actions qualify as "heroic" in resisting the power of the situation to see it the way the authorities wanted her to view it.

So it was clear we had seen enough. I had to end this. And so our planned two-week prison simulation was called off after only six days.

On Friday,

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the last thing we did was to have a series of encounter sessions, first with all the guards, then with all the prisoners including those who had been released and had been invited to come back, and then finally we had a meeting for all the guards and prisoners and staff together. We did this in order to get their feelings out in the open, for catharsis, to recount what we had all observed in each other and in ourselves, and to share our experiential learning which to each of us was quite profound.

Finally, we tried to make this a time for moral reeducation by discussing the moral conflicts posed by this simulation and how we behaved and what were the moral alternatives available to us, so that hopefully we would all behave more morally in future real-life situations,

avoiding or opposing situations that might transform ordinary individuals into willing perpetrators or victims of evil.

Here is the reaction of

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prisoner #416, our would-be hero who had been left in solitary for a considerable time, a middle-class boy who had suffered in our jail for only a few days.

I forgot my reasons for being there. I had come there with reasons—like it'll make me money, you know, things like that. But I found after twenty-four hours I really had no life of my own except what happened to me in this small room. And what happened to me is that I followed people's orders and was shoved around with a paper bag over my head for them. I began to feel that I was losing my identity, that the person that I called "Clay," the person who put me in this place, the person who volunteered to go into this prison—because it was a prison to me; it still is a prison to me [2 months later]. I don't regard it as an experiment or a simulation because it was a prison run by psychologists instead of run by the state. I began to feel that that identity, the person that I was that had decided to go to prison was distant from me—was remote until finally I wasn't that, I was 416. I was really my number.

Compare his reaction to that of the following prisoner

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who wrote to me from an Ohio penitentiary after being in jail for a number of years and repeatedly denied parole, while isolated in solitary confinement for an inhumane length of time:

I was recently released from solitary confinement after being held therein for thirty-seven months. The silence system was imposed upon me and if I even whispered to the man in the next cell resulted in being beaten by guards, sprayed with chemical mace, black jacked, stomped, and thrown into a strip cell naked to sleep on a concrete floor without bedding, covering, wash basin, or even a toilet. Because of my refusal to let the things die down and forget all that happened during my thirty-seven months in solitary, I am the most hated prisoner in this penitentiary, and called a hard-core "incorrigible." Professor Zimbaro, maybe I am an incorrigible, but if true, it's because I would rather die than to accept being treated as less than a human being. I've never complained of my prison sentence as being unjustified except through legal means of appeals. I've never put a knife on a guard's throat and demanded my release. I know that thieves must be punished, and I don't justify stealing even though I am a thief myself. But now I don't think I will be a thief when I am released. No, I am not rehabilitated either. It is just that I no longer think of becoming wealthy or stealing. I now only think of killing—killing those who have beaten me and treated me as if I were a dog. I hope and pray for the sake of my own soul and future life of freedom that I am able to overcome the bitterness and hatred which eats daily at my soul. But I know to overcome it will not be easy.

Our study was terminated on August 20, 1971. The next day, Saturday, August 21, there was an alleged escape attempt at San Quentin. Prisoners in the Maximum Adjustment Center were released from their cells by Soledad brother George Jackson who had a gun smuggled into the prison, perhaps by his lawyer, Jonathan Bingham. They tortured and murdered some informer prisoners and several guards, but were suppressed after their leader was gunned down as he allegedly tried to scale the 30-foot high prison walls. [It has never been established whether Jackson was set up to be killed like this or if it was a real escape attempt that was foiled. I later became an expert witness for the defense of one of the San Quentin Six inmates charged with murder and attempting to escape, Johnny Spain.]

Less than one month later, prisons made more news when,

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the insurrection at Attica Prison in New York erupted. After weeks of negotiations with prisoners who held guards hostage while demanding their basic human rights as people be respected by the prison authorities, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered the National Guard to take back the prison by full force. A great many guards and prisoners were killed and injured by that ill-advised decision.

It is most instructive to note how Prison Superintendent Mancusi of Attica answered a Congressional subcommittee investigating prison reform when he was asked the question, "Could you tell us what lessons you have learned from the disruptions?" He answered in part, "We have instituted two gun posts in our rehabilitation of the institution."

Surely this authority had learned the wrong lesson. It was the inmates that needed better rehabilitation not his concrete and steel institution.

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One of the major demands of the prisoners at Attica was that they be treated like human beings. As a consequence of the short time we spent in our simulated prison, we could understand how prison, indeed how any “total institution,” could dehumanize people, could turn them into objects and instill in them feelings of helplessness and hopelessness while others abused their absolute power. We realized how ordinary people could be readily transformed from the good Dr. Hyde to the evil Mr. Jekyll.

The question now is, how can we begin to change our real institutions so that they promote human values rather than destroy them?

Sadly in the past decades since this experiment took place, prison conditions and correctional policies in the United States have become less enlightened, more punitive, and destructive of the human nature of the imprisoned. The worsening of prison conditions has been a consequence of: the politicization of corrections, with politicians vying for who is toughest on crime, along with the racialization of arrests and sentencing, with African-Americans and Hispanics over-represented, and media-generated fear of violent crimes in the streets, when the statistics indicate that violent crimes are steadily decreasing.

There are more Americans in jails and prisons, both men and women, for longer terms, (at an estimated cost of \$25,000 per year per inmate) than ever before in history.

***U.S. Prison Population Has Doubled*

WASHINGTON (AP)—According to a new Justice Department survey, the number of jailed Americans more than doubled over the past 12 years and reached its highest level ever last year. At mid-1998, jails and prisons held an estimated 1.8 million people, according to a Bureau of Justice Statistics report released Sunday. At the end of 1985, the figure was 744,208. There were 668 inmates for every 100,000 U.S. residents as of June 1998, compared with 313 inmates per 100,000 people in 1985.

THIS IS THE END OF OUR SLIDE SHOW NARRATION.

{SEE FOLLOWING PAGES FOR DISCUSSION ISSUES AND NOTES}

Discussion Issues: Student-Involving Items

A. Specific Points Related to the Slides

1. (Slides 2-8)

Although the subjects knew they had volunteered for an experiment on prison life, do you think they might nevertheless have been shaken when the policeman unexpectedly appeared to arrest them?

Despite their innocence would they still feel guilty about being "arrested" in front of neighbors and sitting handcuffed in the back seat of the squad car?

Also consider the police procedures which make arrestees feel confused, fearful, and dehumanized. Note that the policeman (Slide 6) is "naturally" wearing sunglasses just like those we had our "guards" wear and as did the head of the National Guards at Attica!

2. (Slides 12-14, 34 and others)

What are the effects of living in an environment with no clocks, no view of the outside (sun, night, nature, etc.) and one that is physically constricting, offering minimal sensory stimulation?

3. (Slide 15)

In an exploratory study such as this, one problem is defining what the "data" are--what information should be collected?

What should have been done to minimize the effects of experimenter bias on the outcome of the study? What were the dangers of the principal investigator also assuming the role of prison Superintendent?

4. (Slides 18-25, 29, 30)

Consider the consequences of stripping, delousing, and shaving the heads of individuals in our study, in some real prisons, and in the military.

5. (Slides 26, 28, 48)

Note the posture of the guards and especially how they hold their clubs often "ready for action" in situations where there is little or no objective danger (e.g., at lunch time with only one prisoner making a sandwich at a time, or at night when cells are locked up) as guards walked the Yard.

6. (Slide 31 and others)

What do you suppose were the effects of the frequent blindfolding of inmates on them and on the guards?

7. (Slide 37 and others)

Push-ups were not a very aversive form of punishment, at first, but became more so as the study wore on. Why do you think so? Also, on the first count the guard who initiated push-ups as punishment was the one who later turned out to be the "goodest" guard. You can note already a struggle for power within this night guard shift between him and the guard nicknamed "John Wayne"--he yields.

8. (Slide 50)

Note how the prisoners try to work within the arbitrary system to effect a change in it--setting up a grievance committee--rather than trying to break through the system by using the power of their parents, other outsiders, or other techniques.

Consider why being elected to this committee was an "honor" for the inmates involved.

Why was it important that the Superintendent wear the anonymity-promoting sunglasses during the interview?

9. (Slide 52)

How would You have reacted if you were a visitor in this prison? Compare the reactions of these visitors to reactions of the civilians in encounters with the police or authority--on their home ground vs. at the station.

10. (Slide 53)

What aspects of the priest's behavior and appearance immediately established him as a "counselor"--how is it similar to techniques used by doctors and others in the "healing" professions?

Why would his statement to the prisoners, "that this was a jail, and they had to get a lawyer to get out" be so effective in demoralizing the "tough" prisoners who had not allowed themselves to really believe they were helplessly imprisoned?

11. (Slide 66, 68, 69)

What submissive elements are there in this prisoner's posture? Can you think of other situations where people signal their subordinate status through their posture?

It is interesting to note that most of the prisoners believed that the subjects selected to be guards were chosen because they were "bigger" than those who were made prisoners--actually there was no difference at all in the average height of the two groups!

Also consider the role of language in establishing the "reality" of this prison (the signs, printed prison stationary, the labels, numbers, the rules, parole terminology, etc.).

12. (Slide 70)

This "good" guard and several others never countermanded an order from the tough or bad guards, even though he said he despised their actions.

What are the social and personal reasons why he might privately object, but publicly go along with what the other guards did? How might such behavior actually encourage more deviant behavior by the other guards?

13. (Slide 76)

In the encounter situation, all the prisoners were happy the experiment was over, but most of the guards were upset that it was terminated prematurely. Why do you think so?

The violent, acute emotional outbreaks of the prisoners who were released early quickly faded into a relaxed, happy mood hours after such prisoners were released. Were they faking their emotional distress? How could you tell whether someone else was "really" psychologically disturbed or only role-playing?

At the encounter session, our "ex cons" were most concerned about trying to discern how much of any given guard's behavior was just an act played as part of his perceived role, and how much of it was "really" him. Some of the "ex cons," especially former Prisoner 416, were distressed at "John Wayne" because he was too creative in his ingenious forms of harassment. How do we learn to attribute responsibility for the actions of others to them, to the situation, or to the role demands placed on them? What conditions are likely to lead us to make errors in this attribution process?

14. How do you think the "ex guards" and "ex cons" felt when they saw each other in the same civilian clothes again, and saw their prison reconverted back to a basement laboratory hallway?

Notice in retrospect that during the initial rebellion, one prisoner is screaming out in *disbelief* at the violation of his rights--his property rights--"they took *our* beds. They took *our clothes!!*" The prison bed and the numbered uniform had, in only two days, become "theirs," their own property.

15. (Slide 80)

Finally, consider *how* we can ever change our real institutions such as Attica prison, when they are designed to resist critical evaluation and feedback, and operate in relative secrecy and isolation from outside control by taxpayers and legislators.

B. General, More Abstract Points

1. To what do you attribute the pathological behavior which emerged in both guards and prisoners—to their "dispositions," to the "situation" or to the "transaction"?
2. What is "reality"? This study is one in which an "illusion" of imprisonment was created. But when do illusions become "real"? Contrast consensual reality and physical or biological reality.

Explain the implications of the following poem (by PGZ):

Within the illusion of life,
Death is the only reality,
 but
is Reality the only death?

Within the reality of imprisonment,
Illusion is the only freedom,
 but
is Freedom the only illusion?

3. What form of power did the guards use, the prisoners, the staff? How was this different from the “power” that these middle-class intellectuals typically rely upon? Consider the “joys” of arbitrary power.
4. Do you think lower class, ghetto kids would have reacted in the same emotional way as did those prisoners who broke down? Why? What about women?
5. In George Jackson’s *Soledad* letters he describes an emotional control training he was attempting to impose on himself—to cut off feeling anything. Why would anyone want to do this? In what other situations does this emotional flattening occur? Compare it with Prisoner 416’s statement of becoming distant from “the person who volunteered me for this experiment.”
6. What is identity? Is there a core to your self-identity independent of how others define you? How difficult would it be to remake any given person into a new identity, given unlimited resources?
7. Reflect upon the extent to which your behavior is governed by rules—both explicit ones and implicit expectations. How are they transmitted? If there is a rule governing behavior what do you get for obeying the rule? [Ans. Nothing usually, since it is expected]. And what do you get for not obeying? [Ans. Punishment]; why then in most situations of power, authority, institutional control does behavior modification rarely follow Skinnerian principles of positive reinforcement?
8. The state of being psychologically imprisoned is more pervasive than we acknowledge; steel bars and concrete walls are physical symbols of the prisons we construct in our minds for ourselves and those we force others into. If prisons are seen as forms of control which limit individual freedom of action, of liberty, of personal growth and experience—then discuss the prisons we create through racism, sexism, ageism, poverty, middle-class hang-ups, and other of our insidious devices. Extend your discussion to focus on: a) the illusion of prison

created in many marriages where one spouse becomes “guard,” while the other is “prisoner.”

b) the illusion of prison created in neurosis where the one aspect of the person becomes the “prisoner” who is told he/she is inadequate, helpless, hopeless, etc. and is thus constrained by his/her own personal guard.

c) the silent prison of Shyness, in which the shy person is his or her own guard and prisoner in alternating mentalities.

9. If you were a “guard” which of the three guard types would you have become? How sure are you?

If you were a “prisoner,” would you have been able to endure the experience? What would you have done differently than those subjects did? If you were imprisoned in a “real” prison for five years or more, could you take it?

10. Consider how time perspective was altered in this situation.

11. Consider the process by which “normal” people first begin to develop psychopathological symptoms.

12. Consider how the metaphors of the “guard” and the “prisoners” might co-exist in the mind of the prisoner, and be fundamental to the psychology of shyness.

13. If you were the experimenter in charge would you: a) have done this study; b) terminated it earlier; c) conduct a follow up?

14. Related to the above is the central issue of the Ethics involved in such research—the suffering experienced by the participants pitted against the personal value to them of this unique experience and the social value of the results of such research. (The experimenters did not, and do not, take this issue lightly, although in the narration we have tried to sound matter-of-fact about the events and experiences that occurred).

Consider the ethical issues raised by this study along with that of Milgram’s

obedien

15. Knowing what this research says about the power of prison situations to have a “corrosive” effect on human nature, what recommendations would you make about changing the correctional system in your country?

16. What does it mean to be a Hero, to act heroically? Are you likely to be a Hero?

FINAL NOTES

1. A 50-minute video, “QUIET RAGE: THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT,” with archival and new footage is available for purchase, ordered via forms available on URL :[www:zimbardo.com](http://www.zimbardo.com) in the Media section.

2. Selected references of our articles and chapters related to the SPE can also be found in my publications and Prison related listings on [www:zimbardo.com](http://www.zimbardo.com).

3. There is a Los Angeles based rock and roll band, named “Stanford Prison Experiment,” whose music is a fusion of punk and noise.

4. Some of the positive personal effects of this study:

Prisoner #416, who broke down in less than 36 hours, got a clinical psychology degree, did his internship in a California prison, and has been a forensic psychologist in the San Francisco County Jail for many years following his short time in our jail.

Carlo Prescott went on to become a law-abiding citizen, with his own radio talk show and lectures in local colleges and testimony in Washington, DC to Congressional committees on corrections.

Craig Haney got a Ph.D. and an LL.D. from Stanford University and teaches Psychology and Law courses at U. C. Santa Cruz, and is one of the nation’s leading lawyers handling prisoner litigation.

Christina Maslach is a full professor of Psychology at UC Berkeley and was married to Phil Zimbardo the year after the SPE; they celebrated their 25th anniversary in the Stanford Church last year.

“John Wayne,” is now a mild-mannered real estate broker.

Less good news is that “Sarge” was later arrested for high technology equipment theft.

The End