

Virtual Wyke Start: Psychology Taster Activity

The Stanford Prison Experiment



In 1971, Philip Zimbardo of Stanford University conducted his famous prison experiment, which aimed to examine group behaviour and the importance of roles.

Zimbardo and his team picked a group of 24 male college students who were considered “healthy,” both physically and psychologically. The men signed up to participate in a “psychological study of prison life” and were paid \$15 per day for taking part. Half of the men were randomly assigned to be prisoners and the other half were assigned to be prison guards. The experiment played out in the basement of the Stanford Psychology Department where Zimbardo’s team had created a makeshift (fake) prison. The experimenters went to great lengths to create a realistic experience for the prisoners, including fake arrests at the participants’ homes.

The prisoners were given a fairly standard introduction to prison life, which included wearing embarrassing uniforms. The guards were given vague instructions that they should never be violent with the prisoners, but needed to stay in control. The first day passed without incident, but the prisoners rebelled on the second day by barricading themselves in their cells and ignoring the guards. This behaviour shocked the guards and led the guards to psychologically abuse the prisoners. The guards started separating “good” and “bad” prisoners, and punished prisoners through push ups, solitary confinement (locked up alone in their cells), and rebellious prisoners were publicly humiliated.

Zimbardo explained, “In only a few days, our guards became sadistic and our prisoners became depressed and showed signs of extreme stress”. Two prisoners dropped out of the experiment; one eventually became a psychologist and a consultant for prisons.

