

The Zimbardo Prison Experiment

A powerful and widely cited social psychology study illustrates the power of roles to influence behavior.²⁸ The researchers created a prison environment in the basement of the psychology building at Stanford University. Twenty-four psychologically healthy subjects (people like us) were recruited and randomly assigned to play the roles of prisoners or guards. General rules were provided regarding how to fulfill the role, but subjects were left free to interact within those general guidelines. With the cooperation of the local police, the guards were actually sent out to arrest the prisoners, book them, and transport them to their simulated cells. The prisoners were given uniforms and were referred to by identification numbers. The guards were given comfortable quarters and a recreation area. The guards wore uniforms and mirrored sunglasses, and they worked standard eight-hour shifts during which they were given a great deal of control over the prisoners (physical abuse was not allowed). With rare exceptions, the guards enjoyed the social power and status of the guard role. Some "guards" were exhilarated by the experience and reinforced their guard role with aggression, threats, and insults. The "prisoners" quickly began to show dramatic signs of emotional change, including acute anxiety, helplessness, and passivity verging on complete servility. Some became severely distressed and physically ill.

Although the experiment was originally scheduled to last two weeks, it was halted after only six days due to concern about the prisoners' well-being. "At the end of only six days . . . it was no longer apparent to most of the subjects (or to us) where reality ended and their roles began. The majority had indeed become prisoners or guards, no longer able to clearly differentiate between role playing and the real self. There were dramatic changes in virtually every aspect of their behavior, thinking, and feeling."²⁹

After the experiment ended, the guards expressed a combination of excitement and dismay at the darker side of themselves that had emerged. The simulated situation had become real very quickly, and both sides had readily assumed the roles expected of them as members of their respective groups (prisoner or guard). This occurred despite the other roles these individuals may have played in their "normal" lives just days before. Finally, when individuals attempted to deviate from the role behavior, the deviation was quickly suppressed by pressure to conform as expressed by other group members. The experimental results were used to support the "situational" explanation for prison behavior. In other words, perfectly normal people behaved cruelly and aggressively when placed in a role where these behaviors were either expected or allowed.

The Zimbardo experiment can help us better understand the 2004 Abu Ghraib prison scandal in Iraq. At Abu Ghraib, beginning in 2003, poorly trained American military police officers (MPs) and civilian contractors tortured Iraqi captives in what had ironically been one of Saddam Hussein's most infamous prisons. The brutal torture ranged from physical violence to verbal, psychological, and sexual abuse. The American public became incensed when photographs of the abuse showed up on the Internet thanks to one young military policeman, Joseph Darby. The most famous photos include one of a supervisor giving a thumbs-up sign while standing next to a pyramid of hooded, naked Iraqis. Another shows female Private Lyndie England leading a naked Iraqi around on a leash. According to the Red Cross, most of the prisoners at Abu Ghraib had committed no crime. They had just managed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

So what drove these Americans, men and women, to engage in such horrific behavior and to laugh at the humiliation of other human beings? What happened at Abu Ghraib was complex and likely caused by many factors. But at least some of them seem hauntingly reminiscent of the Zimbardo experiment. The Abu Ghraib guards quickly donned the role of prison police, and they relished the power over prisoners that accompanied the role. This in-role behavior was likely enhanced further by intelligence officers' encouragement to use more aggressive techniques to soften up the prisoners for interrogation and by praise when such techniques "worked."³⁰

Roles at Work

But prisons aren't your average work setting. How do the results of this experiment apply to work organizations? People enter work organizations in a state of "role readiness."³¹ In this state, they're likely to engage in behaviors that are consistent with their organizationally prescribed role, even if those behaviors violate other values they hold (another example of multiple ethical selves). A particularly interesting example is provided by corporate professionals such as lawyers, physicians, and accountants. Professionals are thought to adhere most closely to their professional roles. In fact, this is part of the definition of a professional.

Although there's little research evidence, much anecdotal evidence suggests that many corporate physicians, lawyers, and accountants identify more closely with their