

# Evaluating the criticisms of the Stanford Prison Experiment

There have been a number of recent criticisms of the Stanford Prison Experiment. **Mark McDermott** considers whether it is ‘time to change the story’, or whether the case has been overstated

**Z**imbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) has occupied an almost unassailable position in the pantheon of classic social psychology studies since it was reported 46 years ago. However, 2018 was a challenging year for the SPE, as it was one in which an unrelenting wave of criticism was published.

This wave of SPE criticism drew on the publication of previously unavailable contemporary audio recordings and other materials. Commentators scrutinised this new material to contest Zimbardo’s published accounts of his prison simulation. Notable in articulating criticisms were Reicher, Haslam and Van Bavel in their article ‘Time to change the story’ ([www.tinyurl.com/yyf2c6pc](http://www.tinyurl.com/yyf2c6pc)). Reicher and Haslam conducted the BBC Prison Study as a semi-replication of the SPE. There were other criticisms too, such as Blum in his online article ‘The lifespan of a lie’ ([www.tinyurl.com/y5e2cjc9](http://www.tinyurl.com/y5e2cjc9)).

Identifiable in these criticisms of the SPE, I think, are six main themes which I review here in an attempt to provide a

balanced judgement about each and thereby an overview of the SPE’s ongoing standing within the canon of social psychology.

## An experiment or a demonstration?

Critics of the SPE have pointed out that the study was not an experiment. However, when interviewed Zimbardo consistently has called it a demonstration (see [www.tinyurl.com/y9n9dcop](http://www.tinyurl.com/y9n9dcop)). He has recognised that there is neither a control nor comparison group and that the random allocation of participants to a prisoner or guard role (i.e. the independent variable) only partially qualifies it as an experiment. Neither was there prior specification of dependent variables.

However, an experiment is not the only means by which knowledge can be obtained empirically. Indeed, the authors of both the SPE and the BBC Prison Study have made clear that both studies can best be viewed as one-trial demonstrations, rather than experiments (Haney et al. 2018). Criticisms in this domain, then, are ones of which we should be aware but are not substantive enough to be knowledge breakers. Nevertheless, this leads us on to asking how good a demonstration and simulation of a real prison the SPE was?

## An ecologically valid simulated prison?

A number of observations can be made which suggest the simulated environment of the SPE did not represent the dynamics of a real prison:

- The prison was constructed in the basement of Stanford University’s psychology department.
- The student ‘correction officers’ had not received professional guard training.
- The SPE prison term was short relative to those of inmates in real prisons.
- The college student prisoners were not representative of prison populations in terms of ethnicity, educational attainment and socio-economic status.
- None of the participants had been in prison before.
- The participants were selected as the most stable mentally and least involved in anti-social behaviours of those who had applied to take part.
- There were no indoor or outdoor areas in which exercise or other rehabilitative activity could take place.

Despite this, there are clear indications that the interpersonal power dynamics in the SPE successfully mimicked those in a

### Spec check



Stanford Prison Experiment, BBC Prison Study

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real prison and had similar impacts on both prisoners and guards.

First, on the SPE study design advisory panel was Carlo Prescott, a former prison inmate for 17 years. Prescott was put in charge of the SPE parole board and in that role adopted the same unsympathetic and occasionally disparaging communicative style that he had experienced at his own appeal parole panels.

Second, midway through the experiment a former prison chaplain visited the SPE and made the observation afterward that the prison inmates, in terms of their intermittent protests and dissent, were behaving like 'first timers', before they had become hardened and habituated to the system.

Third, Douglas Korpi, SPE prisoner 8612, after 14 years of being himself a prison psychologist, said of his experience: 'The SPE was a very benign prison situation and it promotes everything a normal prison promotes — the guard role promotes sadism, the prisoner role promotes confusion and shame' (Musen and Zimbardo 1992).

Fourth, though guards at the start of the study were instructed that they could not hit prisoners, they were told it would be permissible to create a sense of boredom, frustration, arbitrariness and powerlessness in inmates. This approach contributed to inmates believing and telling each other that they could not quit or leave until the end of their sentence (notably prisoners 3401, 1037 and 416), as is the case in a real prison. Notwithstanding that two prisoners (8612 and 819) were allowed to leave before the SPE was halted, in this respect prisoner 416 said 2 months afterwards, 'It was a prison to me, a prison run by psychologists rather than by the state.'

With the above in mind, it is evident that the SPE achieved the successful simulation of interpersonal dynamics in which one group variously exerts power and control over another group, as is the case in real prisons. Some guards exerted this control in a sympathetic way, some in a tough but fair way and others in degrading and humiliating ways. As such, the SPE achieved substantial levels of ecological validity.

### **Authentic behaviour or acting?**

Some commentary has examined whether the participants were being authentic or acting, with focus on prisoner 8612, Douglas Korpi, and guard Dave Eshleman. Blum, in his 2018 online article, reports Korpi as saying that

he was faking his emotional outburst (for example, 'I can't stand another night! I just can't take it any more').

Yet, in Musen and Zimbardo's (1992) documentary *Quiet Rage: The Stanford Prison Experiment*, Korpi, by then himself a prison psychologist of long-standing, says of his SPE experience, 'I've never screamed so loud in my life. I've never been so upset in my life. It was an experience of being out of control, both of the situation and of my feelings.' This recall is not consistent with someone pretending to be distressed; rather, it is distinctively authentic in quality.

In the same article, Blum points to guard Eshelman studying acting through high school, noting he adopted a southern accent for the SPE role, quoting him saying, 'I took it as a kind of improv exercise...creating this despicable guard persona.' One implication of this is that Eshelman's behaviour was only an act. However, Eshelman at his own admission, '...believed that I was doing what the researchers wanted me to do'. So, his behaviour was his response to what he perceived to be the demand characteristics of the simulated prison and of his role.

To what extent this is role conformity in action and/or identification with the researchers is another issue (taken up below). What is clear is that Eshelman believed he was behaving as a punitive guard would. This did not make his actions any less real for those around him in the SPE or less impactful on them. Therefore, the allegation that SPE behaviour is fake, inauthentic or just acting has little to commend it.

### **Role conformity or identity leadership?**

From a theoretical perspective, perhaps the most important criticism of the SPE has focused on Zimbardo's role conformity explanation, drawing on conflicting accounts of what was said or wasn't said to the student guards by him as prison superintendent and principle researcher.

Reicher et al. (2018) have contended that SPE participants were not simply conforming to their assigned role, but that some identified with and were following the leadership of Zimbardo — that in effect they were obeying his authority. Much is made in their critique of the archive recording of prison warden David Jaffe's conversation with prisoner John Mark. Jaffe tries to persuade Mark to behave in a more 'tough' and 'firm' way. However, hearing this audio recording

([www.tinyurl.com/y5mej5yn](http://www.tinyurl.com/y5mej5yn) – start listening from 8.38 minutes) it is apparent that warden Jaffe did not succeed in persuading Mark, who quietly resisted saying: 'Well, I don't know about that', 'I don't get into this thing too much' and 'I don't think I am a very good guard for this experiment.'

So, the recording highlights the fact that Mark succeeded in passively resisting Jaffe's attempts to elicit more toughness from him. Further, there is no evidence that this effort to steer the SPE generalised to other guards, even though this is implied in the critique. Undoubtedly, Zimbardo laid down ground rules for how the guards should behave at the beginning of the study, so in that sense there was authority and leadership. But to attribute the cause of the guard's behaviour to identity leadership rather than role-conformity on the basis of this instance is not tenable.

### **The BBC Prison Study (BBC-PS)**

The identity leadership explanation arose from Reicher and Haslam's (2006) BBC Prison Study (BBC-PS). They questioned whether the dominance of the guards over the prisoners in the SPE was the only possible outcome in a prison simulation. In the BBC-PS one of the planned interventions was the introduction of a participant who previously had been an experienced trade union official.

Reicher and Haslam found that with such adept leadership the prisoner participants did overcome the authority and control of the guards. Arguably, the presence of the skilled



Philip Zimbardo, answering questions about the SPE in 2015



Still from a recent film made about the SPE (2015)

trade union official in the BBC-PS facilitated the others' emerging identification with their role as inmates who did successfully challenge the authority of the guards.

Notably, the role conformity and identity leadership explanations are not mutually exclusive and it is highly probable that both need to be invoked to explain the findings of each prison study. As Haney et al. (2018) write in their joint statement: '...the behaviours observed in the SPE and the BBC-PS were a function of many factors, including roles, norms, leadership, social identification, group pressure and individual differences.'

### Historically relative observations?

A critical comment that is voiced about the SPE and other landmark social influence studies is that they occurred a long time ago, are not relevant to today and that their results could not happen in these different times. Despite this, we recognise situational influence in our day-to-day lives, such as the design of retail stores to increase our purchasing behaviour.

In social policy forums, the tactic of 'nudging' people to make prosocial choices relies on an understanding that situational influence is effective. Also, there is much research evidence both before and after the SPE to suggest that it demonstrates something stable and durable about the power

of situations to influence behaviour. Such evidence can be found in both role-conformity studies (for example, Asch) and obedience to authority studies (for example, Milgram).

A more ecologically compelling but less cited study that supports the 'power of situations' view is by Gamson et al. (1982). They led participants to believe they were to explore community standards, but later in the study discovered their recorded comments were to be used as commercial product endorsements. Gamson et al. found that whether participants decided to go against their testimonies being used in this unauthorised way related to whether such individuals were kept apart from each other or together. If they were together this provided the opportunity to collectively define the situation as unjust and move people as a group towards rebellion.

A contemporary example of this effect in action is the police strategy of 'kettling' protesters (constraining of movement) which actually is counterproductive because it tends to enhance rather than reduce oppositional behaviour.

So, Zimbardo's work on situational influence is part of an extensive body of empirical work that demonstrates such effects are observable across different contexts and epochs.

### Ethical issues

Criticisms about the ethics of the SPE were discussed in an article by me in *PSYCHOLOGY REVIEW* Vol. 24, No. 3. Zimbardo has long recognised that if he were to run the SPE again, he would separate the role of

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### In summary and conclusion

Though the SPE was challenged in 2018 by various commentators, I have argued here that they collectively over-state the critical case and that the key message and legacy of the SPE remains intact, namely that situations in which we find ourselves, the roles which we inhabit, the behaviour of others around us, all have very significant effects on our behaviour and impact our personal agency in ways in which we tend to underestimate. Role conformity, identity leadership and obedience to authority all figure as important contributors in a multifactorial understanding of complex social scenarios in which agency, power and control are at stake.

Given the rapprochement between the SPE and BBC-PS researchers in their consensus statement highlighting common ground (Haney et al. 2018), social psychology now has the potential to see a flourishing of new work on simulated environments, as we continue to learn from the example of the SPE and from those that follow in its footsteps.

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