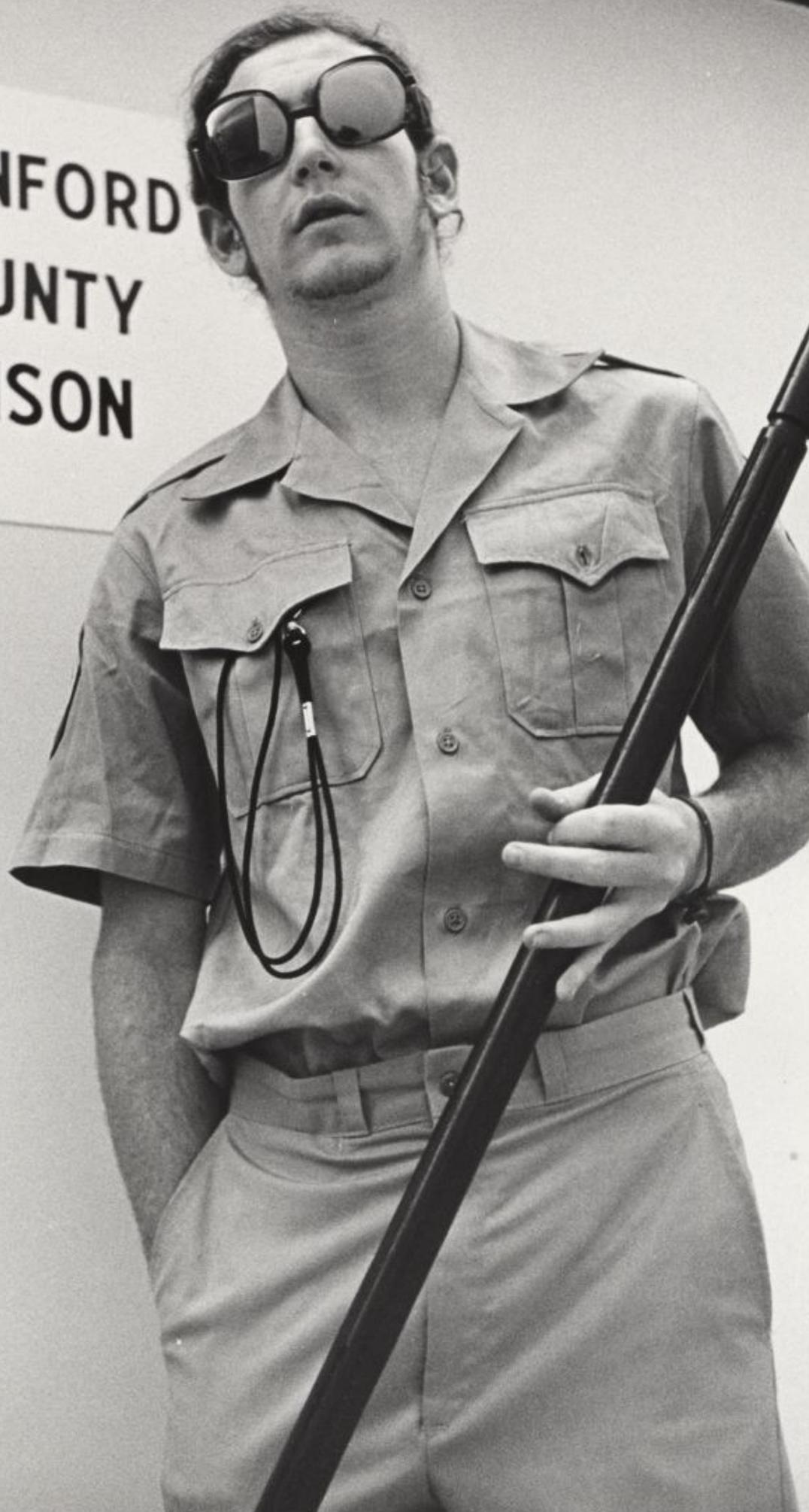


# The pointless prison experiment

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STANFORD  
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# The Pointless Prison Experiment

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The Stanford Prison Experiment, Philip Zimbardo's epic and legendary investigation into the darker side of the human condition, proved nothing we didn't know already, and at a heavy cost.

The experiment, conducted at Stanford University's psychology department in the summer of 1971, was designed to answer some of the age old questions about human nature, such as – what happens when you put good people in an evil place? Does humanity win over evil, or does evil triumph?

To really understand the significance of the Stanford Prison Experiment, it has to be viewed against the background of the American legal and penal system. America may be the land of the free, but it also has the world's highest prison population per capita – higher than any other country in the world, with the possible exception of China. America is notoriously harsh and unforgiving when its citizens (and other country's citizens) get it wrong.

In the year 2000, four otherwise law abiding Americans went to Honduras on a fishing holiday. Re-entering the United States, they were charged with importing lobster tails into the US in contravention of an agreement between the US and Honduras. The agreement stated that lobster tails could be imported into the US if they were packed in cardboard boxes. The four amateur fishermen had brought the tails into the US in plastic bags. Their mistake earned three of them eight years in prison each.

They were prosecuted under the Lacey Act which was originally designed to stop US citizens poaching endangered species, for example rhino in Africa, but the act covered just about every other minor misdemeanour the authorities could think of. The fact that the Honduran government had scrapped the archaic regulation some years before made no difference to the way the men were treated and the 'tough on crime' state attorneys got their convictions.

This is one of the problems with the justice system in America. Its rules are complex and far-reaching and if a citizen falls foul of them, then they better watch out! Don't expect America to exercise any sense of proportion. If you get it wrong, you are, to put it bluntly, f\*\*ked.

America locks up five times more people than Britain, nine times more than Germany, and twelve times more than Japan. Somewhere between 2.3 and 2.4 million Americans are currently behind bars. America is the land of the free, apple pie and maximum security prisons. It criminalises things that shouldn't be thought of as criminal. Jaywalk in New York and you will go to jail. Smoke a joint in Texas and you could face up to fifteen years behind bars, although to be fair, the usual sentence is a much more reasonable five years. In 2004, Dr. William Hurwitz, a specialist in the treatment of pain was sentenced to 25 years in prison because one of his patients, without his knowledge, sold his prescription on the black market.

At the time the Stanford experiment was run, the mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners (most of them, civilians) by American forces at Abu Ghraib prison hadn't yet happened, so Zimbardo's experiment in determining human behaviour seemed to be unnecessary. But the experiment went terribly wrong and resulted in Zimbardo's severe censure and overnight elevation to the status of the world's greatest living psychologist!

Originally planned as a two-week experiment, the project was terminated after just six days because of the profound traumatic effect on those students who had agreed to participate in it. Within a few days, the students playing the part of the 'guards' became sadistic and the 'prisoners' stressed, depressed and withdrawn.

Remember, the students had no training whatsoever as prison guards – they were young, still in their late teens, and did not have the knowledge or experience of life compared to grown adults who receive proper training before becoming professional prison officers. When a group of teenagers are given authority beyond their maturity, the inevitable result is bound to be bullying.

Volunteers in the project were 'arrested' at home, handcuffed, and bundled into the back of a real police car by real policemen, and upon arriving at the 'jail' they were put into a holding cell and blindfolded, even though blindfolding would not normally happen in real life, even in America. This was the first step in the dehumanising process.

The volunteers for the experiment had answered an ad in the local newspaper some months previously 'calling for volunteers in a study of the psychological effects of prison life.' To do this, Zimbardo 'set up a simulated prison and then carefully noted the effects of this institution on the behaviour of all those within its walls.'

The first question must be... why not send the psychologists into a real prison and monitor real prisoners instead of a couple of dozen college students with no criminal tendencies and no previous contact with the criminal world? Surely that would have provided a more accurate study?

With a flip of a coin, the teenagers were divided into 2 groups – 'prisoners' and 'guards.' At the start of the experiment, there were no differences between boys assigned to be prisoners and boys assigned to be guards – all were normal, healthy young men. The 'prison' was created by boarding up each end of a corridor in the basement of Stanford's Psychology Department. An ex prisoner with 17 years in the United States penal system was hired as a consultant, and the 'yard' outside was the only outside place where prisoners were allowed to walk, eat, or exercise, except to go to the toilet down the hallway (which prisoners did blindfolded so as not to know the way out of the prison.) There was even a special room set aside for solitary confinement, about two feet wide and two feet deep, but tall enough that a 'bad prisoner' could stand up.

So conditions in the Stanford prison were more harsh than in a real prison. There were no windows or clocks to judge the passage of time, later resulting in some time-distorting experiences. So just like a Las Vegas casino...

When the teenage 'prisoners' were arrested at the commencement of the experiment, they did not know that the experiment they had volunteered for some months previously had begun. They were forced to strip and were 'de-loused' – step 2 in the degradation process. I am still amazed that Zimbardo got this past the University ethics committee, but in fairness, I don't think that anyone could have foreseen what was to about to unfold.

The prisoners were then given a uniform consisting of a simple one-piece smock, complete with identification number front and back, with no underclothes. They wore a heavy chain on their right ankle which was attached at all times – something that rarely happens in prisons in

America. Footwear consisted of rubber sandals and the prisoner's hair was tied up in a nylon stocking cap.

However, Zimbardo wasn't trying to create a functional simulation of a prison – his goal was to see what would happen if the male prisoners were emasculated by being made to wear a dress without underclothes. He wasn't disappointed because they very quickly began to walk and hold themselves differently.

The chain on their foot was to remind prisoners of the oppressiveness of their environment. Even when prisoners were asleep, they could not escape the atmosphere of oppression. When a prisoner turned over in his sleep, 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. At least they stopped short of waterboarding.

The use of ID numbers was a way to make prisoners feel anonymous. If you remember Patrick McGoochan's cult sixties TV series *This Prisoner*, the same system of numbers was used to great effect – no names, just numbers. Each Stanford prisoner was addressed only by his number and could only refer to himself and the other prisoners by number.

The stocking cap was a substitute for having the prisoner's head shaved – something which does take place in most US prisons (and the military) and is designed in part to minimise each person's individuality, because many people express their individuality through hair style or length. It is also a way of getting people to begin complying with the arbitrary, coercive rules of the institution.

The teenage guards were given no specific training on how to be guards. Instead they were free, within limits, to do whatever they thought was necessary to maintain order in the prison and to command the respect of the prisoners. They made their own rules, which they then carried into effect under the supervision of 'Warden' David Jaffe, an undergraduate from Stanford University, and therefore fully qualified to supervise this unique experiment. The guards, like really guards, were warned of the potential and possible dangers of the job.

Remember, the purpose of the study was to study both the prisoners *and* the guards.

The cells were so small there was room for only three cots on which the prisoners slept or sat, with room for little else. At 2:30am the prisoners were awakened by blasting whistles for the first of many 'counts.' These counts provided an opportunity for the guards to exercise control over the prisoners. At first, the prisoners were not completely into their roles and did not take the counts too seriously – they were still hiding on to their independence. The guards too were feeling out their new roles and were not yet sure how to assert authority over their prisoners. Soon, there would be a series of direct confrontations between the guards and prisoners.

Push-ups were a common form of physical punishment imposed by the guards to penalise infractions of the rules or displays of improper attitudes toward the guards or the institution. Again, try to remember that these are just college kids... [Push-ups were often used as a form of punishment in Nazi concentration camps.]

It's noteworthy that one of the guards stepped on the prisoners' backs while they did push-ups, or made other prisoners sit or step on the backs of fellow prisoners doing their push-ups.

Because the first day passed without incident, Zimbardo was 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.

So now the problem was... what to do about the rebellion?

The guards were angered and frustrated because the prisoners also began to taunt and curse them. When the morning shift came on, they became upset with the night shift who, they felt, must have been too lenient. The guards had to handle the rebellion themselves, and what they did was fascinating...

At first they insisted that reinforcements 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. The guards met and decided to treat force with force.

The guards got a fire extinguisher which blasted the prisoners with freezing carbon dioxide, and they forced the prisoners away from the doors. (The fire extinguishers were present in compliance with the requirement by the Stanford Human Subjects Research Panel, which was concerned about potential fire threats. Shame they weren't concerned about fucking up young people's heads.)

The guards broke into each cell, stripped the prisoners naked, took the beds out, forced the ringleaders of the prisoner rebellion into solitary confinement, and generally began to harass and intimidate the prisoners.

All this is reminiscent of the 'meet force with force' of jail riot situations in many undemocratic countries, especially third world dictatorships. It was a common tactic in the Soviet Gulag, where real bullets were often used instead of fire extinguishers, or the prison riots in Mexico. When you put idiots in charge, any pretence of reason goes out of the window – the first reaction is to crush the bastards, whatever the cost.

Soon after sanity returned to the corridor, 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, got their beds back, and were allowed to wash and brush their teeth. The others were not. Privileged prisoners also got to eat special food in the presence of the other prisoners who had temporarily lost the privilege of eating. The effect was to break the solidarity among prisoners. Again, this tactic was used frequently and with great effect in Stalin's Gulag, in the Warsaw Ghetto, as well as in the Nazi concentration camps where selected prisoners were given extra privileges in return for doing the guards dirty work for them.

Zimbardo asks *'How do you think you would have behaved if you were a prisoner in this situation? Would you have rejected these privileges in order to maintain prisoner solidarity?'*

Well Phil, you don't need to mess with college students to see that myth busted. A quick look at the history books would have uncovered the truth. For a fraction of the budget for the Stanford Experiment, you could have saved yourself (and others) a whole heap of heartbreak and read Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* – it's all in there!

The practice of moving prisoners around – divide and rule – was also adopted. This made the prisoners distrustful of each other, thus serving to negate the ‘us and them’ state of affairs between prisoners and guards.

Prisoners were often forced to urinate or defecate in a bucket that was left in their cell. On occasion the guards would not allow prisoners to empty these buckets, and soon the prison began to smell of urine and faeces – the next step in the systematic degradation of human beings.

One prisoner became emotionally disturbed within 48 hours and had to be ‘released’ – despite the experimenters offering him better treatment if he became an informant.

A visiting hour for parents and friends was held, although *their* behaviour was also brought under situational control. They had to register, were made to wait half an hour, were told that only two visitors could see any one prisoner, were limited to only ten minutes of visiting time, and had to be under the surveillance of a guard during the visit and so on. Of course, parents complained about these arbitrary rules, but remarkably, they complied with them.

There are shades of Stanley Milgram’s experiments here too, where people complied in brutal acts when faced with perceived legitimate authority. Being good middle-class, respectful of authority, all-American adults the parents too became bit players in the prison drama.

Two of the parents got upset when they saw how fatigued and distressed their son was. But their reaction was to work within the system to appeal privately to the prison superintendent to make conditions better for their boy. This was the typical reaction of all the parents.

Zimbardo asks us to compare the reactions of these visitors to the reactions of civilians in encounters with the police or other authorities. How typical was their behaviour?

The answer is, very typical, and there are lots of *real* instances for Zimbardo to have studied without going to these ridiculous lengths. Question and answer interviews with real parents visiting real kids in America’s overflowing prison system would have been more accurate and er... more real.

A rumoured mass escape plot (the authorities discovered that the prisoner that was released early was going to get a bunch of his friends to facilitate a mass break-out) was dealt with by calling in more guards, chaining the prisoners together, putting bags over their heads, and transporting them to a fifth floor storage room until after the anticipated break in/out. The prison break did not in fact materialise.

After a huge effort was put in to foil the Stanford Prison Break, the guards became even more frustrated and stepped up their campaign of harassment – they increased their humiliation of the prisoners, forcing them to do menial, repetitive work such as cleaning out toilet bowls with their bare hands.

By this time, the guards had the prisoners calling them ‘Mr. Correctional Officer’. Three prisoners were now on the verge of total breakdown, displaying easily recognisable symptoms of uncontrollable sobbing, hysterics and feelings of sickness.

The guards organised the prisoners in the yard to start chanting in unison, “#819 is a bad prisoner!”

Zimbardo said *'As soon as I realised that #819 could hear the chanting, I raced back to the room where I had left him, and what I found was a boy sobbing uncontrollably while in the background his fellow prisoners were yelling that he was a bad prisoner. No longer was the chanting disorganised and full of fun, as it had been on the first day. Now it was marked by utter conformity and compliance, as if a single voice was saying, '#819 is bad'.*

*'I suggested we leave, but he refused. Through his tears, he said he could not leave because the others had labeled him a bad prisoner. Even though he was feeling sick, he wanted to go back and prove 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, looked up at me like a small child awakened from a nightmare, and replied, 'Okay, let's go'.*

*'The next day, all prisoners who thought they had grounds for being paroled were chained together and individually brought before the Parole Board. When we asked prisoners whether they would forfeit the \$15 per day they had earned up to that time if we were to parole them, most said yes. Then, when we ended the hearings by telling prisoners to go back to their cells while we considered their requests, every prisoner obeyed, even though they could have obtained the same result by simply quitting the experiment'.*

So why did they obey?

Zimbardo claims it was because they felt powerless to resist. Their sense of reality had shifted, and they no longer perceived their imprisonment as an experiment. I would suggest that it was because of the way the question was put to them. At the start of the experiment, right back to the time they answered the ad in the newspaper, they were told that they could opt out at any time, they were not given this choice at their appearance before the phoney parole board.

The parents of one prisoner even hired a lawyer to get their son out of Stanford!

There is a common thread running through Zimbardo's narrative of the experiment. Everyone who took part, the consultant, even Zimbardo himself, became intoxicated by their roles in the project. Zimbardo admits to falling into the role of prison warden so successfully that he became genuinely angry when the Palo Alto Police Department decided they were unable to give any further assistance.

By the fifth day, a new relationship had emerged between prisoners and guards. There were three types of guards.

'First, there were tough but fair guards who followed prison rules. Second, there were 'good guys' who did little favours for the prisoners and never punished them. And finally, about a third of the guards were hostile, arbitrary, and inventive in their forms of prisoner humiliation. These guards appeared to thoroughly enjoy the power they wielded, yet none of our (pre-experiment) preliminary personality tests were able to predict this behaviour.

*'The only link between personality and prison behaviour was a finding that prisoners with a high degree of authoritarianism endured our authoritarian prison environment longer than did other prisoners'.*

That is certainly an interesting observation and one worthy of more study, but again, it is still something that could have been picked up by observing real prisoners in real prisons.

In 2003 U.S. troops arrived in the Middle East to free the Iraqi people from the brutal regime of Saddam Hussain. Having toppled Saddam, and statues of Saddam, American troops set about brutalising Iraqi prisoners – most of them non-combatant civilians – in Abu Ghraib Prison. Prisoners were stripped, made to wear bags over their heads, and sexually humiliated while the guards laughed and took photographs.

It was because of what happened in Abu Ghraib that Zimbardo's reputation was rehabilitated. With more than just a hint of 'I told you so' Zimbardo become flavour of the month. Now he asks, *'how is this abuse similar to, or different from what took place in the Stanford Prison Experiment?'*

The answer is more simple and more obvious than Zimbardo might care to admit. At Stanford, the guards were immature, untrained, ill disciplined, badly supervised kids, some of whom, when left to their own devices, ran out of control, taking delight in making the prisoners wear smocks and piss in buckets. They offered all sorts of humiliation and took perverse pleasure in doing so. In Abu Ghraib the guards were immature, untrained, ill disciplined, badly supervised kids, some of whom, when left to their own devices ran out of control, taking delight in making the prisoners wear smocks and piss in buckets. They offered all sorts of humiliation and took perverse pleasure in doing so.

The Iraqi prisoners displayed a variety of survival strategies to cope with their experience. These included breaking down emotionally as a way of escaping the situation or being good prisoners, doing everything the guards wanted them to do. Some constantly rebelled against the system and even fought with the guards.

I once knew someone who had been in a women's prison. Everything she told me fitted perfectly the three basic guard and prisoner types described by Zimbardo – he might have learned more had he interviewed so real prisoners and prison warders. But maybe I'm forgetting that the point of the experiment was to study both the prisoners *and* the guards.

Nonetheless, there is nothing that came out of Stanford that could not have been more realistically observed in a real prison, and let's face it, with over two million people in US prisons, there would have been plenty of opportunity to do so, and no doubt plenty of willing volunteers willing to talk about their experiences. There is little doubt that a polite request for access to the American penal system by the psychology department of such an esteemed academic institution as Stanford University would have met with State approval and cooperation.

In the Stanford prison, the guards won total control of the prison, and they commanded the blind obedience of each prisoner, but at what cost to sensitive young minds?

The Stanford Prison experience would certainly represent a peak experience in those young people's lives, and one that will, even after de-briefing, stay with them all their lives. I wonder

how the experience affects their emotions now every time they see a police car pull up, or find themselves walking down a narrow windowless corridor? All Zimbardo succeeded in doing was to traumatise some vulnerable teenagers who may very well end up with nightmares for rest of their lives. I don't suppose for one moment anyone has thought to catch up with these student volunteers to find out how they're getting on. Ex-prisoners I have spoken to tell me that the memory of the experience never goes away.

OK, I admit I have met some shady characters in my time, but hey – that's show business! I also admit to a fascination with their stories, but then again, I am just as fascinated by the stories of people who have achieved great things. I was always interested in my father's war stories – he was a fighter pilot, but even short term involuntary incarceration of the innocent will have life changing consequences, especially on the young and vulnerable.

The penal system might be the only solution for serial wrongdoers, but please... not for innocent teenagers whose only crime was to volunteer to take part in a psychology experiment.

By Zimbardo's own admission *'By the end of the study, the prisoners were disintegrated, both as a group and as individuals. There was no longer any group unity; just a bunch of isolated individuals hanging on, much like prisoners of war or hospitalised mental patients...*

*'Prisoner #416 was newly admitted as one of our stand-by prisoners. Unlike the other prisoners, who had experienced a gradual escalation of harassment, this prisoner's horror was full-blown when he arrived. The 'old timer' prisoners told him that quitting was impossible, that it was a real prison.*

*'Prisoner #416 coped by going on a hunger strike to force his release. After several unsuccessful attempts to get #416 to eat, the guards threw him into solitary confinement for three hours, even though their own rules stated that one hour was the limit. Still, #416 refused.*

*At this point #416 should have been a hero to the other prisoners. But instead, the others saw him as a troublemaker. The head guard then exploited this feeling by giving prisoners a choice. They could have #416 come out of solitary if they were willing to give up their blanket, or they could leave #416 in solitary all night'.*

*'What do you think they chose?*

*'Most elected to keep their blanket and let their fellow prisoner suffer in solitary all night. (We intervened later and returned #416 to his cell.)'*

Zimbardo took this statement from a man in Ohio penitentiary after being 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... [Remember this is America, the land of the free]*

*'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’.*

On August 21, 1971, the day after the Stanford Experiment was ended a week prematurely, there was an alleged escape attempt at one of America’s most notorious jails, San Quentin. Prisoners in the Maximum Adjustment Center were released from their cells by Soledad brother George Jackson, who had smuggled a gun into the prison. Several guards and some informant prisoners were tortured and murdered during the attempt, but the escape was prevented after the leader was allegedly gunned down while trying to scale the 30-foot high prison walls.

Less than one month later, American prisons made the news again when a riot erupted at Attica Prison in New York. After weeks of negotiations with prisoners who held guards hostage while demanding basic human rights, 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 because of his decision. One of the demands of the prisoners at Attica was that they be treated like human beings.

*Zimbardo commented ‘After observing our simulated prison for only six days, we could understand how prisons dehumanise people, turning them into objects and instilling in them feelings of hopelessness. And as for guards, we realised how ordinary people could be readily transformed from the good Dr. Jekyll to the evil Mr. Hyde.*

In the decades since the Stanford Experiment, prison conditions and correctional policies in the United States have become even more punitive, more inhuman and more destructive. The worsening of conditions are a result of the politicisation of corrections, with politicians vying for who is toughest on crime, along with the racialisation of arrests and sentencing, with African-Americans and Hispanics overrepresented. The media has also contributed to the problem by generating heightened fear of violent crimes even as statistics show that violent crimes have decreased. There are more Americans in prisons than ever before.

The ways of dealing with hunger-strikers and trouble makers was far more efficient in the much larger, though less famous Stalin Prison Experiment, 1933 – 1947.

The Stalin Prison Experiment worked well and has been copied successfully by other similarly enlightened regimes, such as those in Chile during the Pinochet era, in Zimbabwe during the never ending presidency of Robert Mugabe, in North Korea under both the Great Leader Kim Il Sung, more recently the Dear Leader Kim Jong Il, and of his son and heir Kim Jong Un and of course... the United States of America.

As more and more countries that were once governed by murderous dictatorships embrace democracy, this kind of prison experiment is slowly going out of fashion, although the United States stubbornly clings to old traditions. Prisons in the US have more in-prison murders and general violence. But then America is by far the most violent country in the so-called ‘civilised’ Western world.

All the behaviours observed at Stanford were present in Stalin’s Gulag. Most of the guards were Young Communist officials – immature, untrained, ill disciplined, badly supervised, and some of whom, when left to their own devices, ran out of control, taking delight in depriving

prisoners of their clothes in sub-zero temperatures and forced them to piss in buckets. They offered all sorts of humiliation and took perverse pleasure in doing so.

The guards in the Gulag fell into the three groups Zimbardo described. The old divide and rule philosophy was ruthlessly exploited and the prisoners adopted the same dog-eat-dog attitudes. Most had been arbitrarily arrested, put on the first train to Siberia and upon arrival, given a number and handed a shovel. The only difference was that in the Gulag, life expectancy could be as little as five days. The vast majority of prisoners in the Stalin Prison Experiment did not survive to the end of their draconian sentences, though many thousands did, and lived to tell the tale., amongst them, Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Again, I refer to the enormous amount of material from the Stalin Experiment, including thousands of first hand accounts – Solzenytsin’s being the most well known – and tens of thousands of official documents from the Purges. Stalin’s experiment was more spectacular because it involved more than 20 million prisoners.

If Zimbardo wanted to find out what happens for real when an unofficial prison is set up and becomes an unregulated free-for-all, he could have done no better than take a look at the ANC Prison Experiment and the experiences of the ‘inmates’ of Camp Quatro, the African National Congress’ ‘rehabilitation centre’ in Angola during the apartheid era.

South African author Paul Trewhela relates a dreadful truth that the ANC would rather forget. In his book, *Inside Quatro: Uncovering the Exile history of the ANC and Swapo* we can see the horrors of unfettered control in a much more realistic light. This was no experiment, it was real – just as real and as terrible as the Nazi Concentration Camps and the Gulag.

Officially known as Camp 32, Quatro was established in 1979, ostensibly to ‘re-educate’ ANC members. Quatro was worse than any prison of the Apartheid regime. Its inmates were made up from those who had either turned against the ANC or had become informers. The solution represented an innocent simplicity in that ANC members who could no longer be trusted were kidnapped and smuggled over the border to Angola. Once in Quatro, they were given an opportunity to once more learn to love the ANC.

Quatro became one of the most feared of the secret camps the ANC had set up and only a select few in the ANC leadership knew about it. Those that did know about it included Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela.

Quatro was administered by members of the ANC’s security forces – mostly young members of the underground South African Communist Party – the SACP. The security guards and the warders were drawn from the young and politically naive, many of whom were fanatical supporters of the military leadership of Joe Modise and Oliver Tambo, and they kept to strict warnings about secrecy. (Oliver Tambo later had Johannesburg International Airport re-named after him.)

Prisoners were transported to Quatro blindfolded and forced to lie flat on the floor of the ‘security vehicle’ carrying them. On arrival at the camp, they were given pseudonyms, again reminiscent of the numbers system in Patrick McGoochan’s *The Prisoner*. Inmates were allowed contact only with their immediate cell-mates and were not allowed even to peep out of windows. To move around the camp, even for work, they had to seek ‘permission to pass.’ Any breaches of the rules of secrecy were punishable by severe beatings and floggings.

Those lucky enough to survive were forced to promise never to release any information about their time at the camp or any details about their activities there.

Quatro had seven communal cells, so overcrowded, that as in Moscow's notorious Lubyanka Prison, that a mere turn of a sleeping position would awaken the whole cell. There was hardly any ventilation and in the African heat, conditions were suffocating. In each cell, plastic containers covered with a makeshift cardboard lid served as the latrine for the whole cell. Blankets were sometimes never washed and were infested with lice. The only cursory or superficial clean-ups carried out were on the rare occasion when high ranking ANC officials visited the camp. Even then, inmates were told to keep their mouths shut.

[In Solzhenitsyn's account of the Gulag, during a visit by the writer Maxim Gorky – a staunch Party supporter, to preserve the illusion of tidiness and efficiency, a group of prisoners were ordered to sit down and keep *their* mouth's shut whilst guards covered them with a tarpaulin until Gorky had left the area!]

Apart from its obvious brutality, what marks the similarity between Quatro, Abu Ghraib and Stanford, was the aggressive psychological humiliation that was part and parcel of life there. Detainees exhibited meek and subservient behaviour toward their captors who in turn adopted a domineering and intimidating posture. There were many attempted and successful suicides.

The guards gave prisoners rude names, thereby stripping them of any last remaining vestige of individuality. Every prisoner was known as 'umdlwembe,' meaning 'traitor.'

The daily routine at Quatro would begin at 6.00am with emptying of latrines, more often than not carried out under a hail of verbal and physical abuse from the guards, who were known as 'commanders.' The whole prison population would then have to wash from a single container in which the water was unchanged. The only food was available was leftovers from the guard's table or food that had been rejected by the guard's cadres because it had spoiled.

The medical clinic at Quatro was even worse. Manned by brutal personnel, the standard 'cure' was more beatings and further inhumane treatment.

If prisoners had been beaten by a 'commander,' they were not supposed to say that they had been beaten. In any event, 'commanders' didn't beat prisoners, they 'corrected' them.

Prisoners polished the guard's boots and ironed their clothes. Prisoners were forced to do hard and back-breaking labour. Prisoners were not allowed to walk – they had to move everywhere on the double. Whipping with coffee tree branches, trampling with boots, blows with fists... Prisoners would jump in fear of commanders, all of whom treated them like slaves. All of them were terrified of the guards. Commanders ordered prisoners in other cells to sing in order to mask the screams of those being beaten. Unreasonably hard and often hazardous work was done by prisoners and unreasonable targets set.

It is impossible not to see the similarities. If nothing else, it's a prima facie example of history, and humanity, repeating itself. Survivors of Quatro remained traumatised for years afterwards.

In 2002, the BBC launched its own version of the Stanford Experiment, called – somewhat unimaginatively – *The BBC Prison Study*.

After the usual screening process, 15 individuals were selected to play the roles of prisoners and guards. The ratio of prisoners to guards, for reasons no one has been able to explain, were 10 guards to 5 prisoners. In this instance, the participants took part under the 'informed consent' rule. What this means is, unlike the Stalin Prison Experiment, the Abu Ghraib Prison Experiment or the Quatro Prison Experiment, the purpose of the experiment was explained to the participants beforehand.

One guaranteed way to ruin a psychology experiment is to start off with the words 'this is an experiment'. Under these circumstances, participants tend to role-play in ways that they think are expected of them, rather than being given a completely free hand to behave as they might if they didn't have any idea it was an experiment. Thus, the results of experiments are bound to be contaminated from the start. This is often the problem when experiments are carried out under controlled conditions, or when Ethics Committees poke their nose in.

Having said that, some of the results were predictable. At first, the 'prisoners' cooperated with the guards, but before long, an 'us and them' situation started to develop. The Prisoners became uncooperative and started to band together as a group. This of course is typical of any prison environment – the kind of war of attrition that's the source of much of the humour in the BBC sit-com *Porridge*, the BBC's original prison experiment, except that this time, the 'experiment was controlled in such a way that no one was traumatised or hurt.

It is interesting that Zimbardo objected to the BBC replay of the experiment on the grounds that a made-for-television/reality show was not serious social science and I agree – for the reasons above.

One useful thing that did come out of the BBC version was that groups empower their members to make choices, which, particularly in a prison environment, may be good for individuals' well-being.

The failure of any group to apply pressure or to effect a change in circumstances for the good of the whole group is counter-productive because it removes choices – something which is bad for the well-being of individual members of the group. It is, as Zimbardo proved at Stanford, bad for the whole of society because it is easy to be seduced by tyranny.

You only have to look at the disgrace brought upon the United States of America by the Abu Ghraib debacle, the ignominy brought on the glorious worker's paradise of the Soviet Union by the Gulags, the dishonour and humiliation brought on the African National Congress by Quatro, and the embarrassment brought on the BBC – who were forced to stop the experiment two days early – by a foray into reality television masquerading as serious scientific research.

There was already a wealth of literature, eye-witness accounts and testimony, not to mention thousands of real prisons, real guards and real convicts Zimbardo could have studied outside the goldfish bowl of the laboratory to confirm his theories. After all, what could be better or more accurate than studying the real thing?

Where there are no checks, power over one's fellow man corrupts those who hold and go on to wield that power. It could be said that absolute power, in this case the absolute power provided by the experimenters, corrupts absolutely. One thing the experiment did prove is that when the powerful are left to their own devices, this kind of insidious corruption takes hold astonishingly quickly.

Even those taking part more often than not will turn a blind eye rather than step forward to object. Sometimes they simply look for employment elsewhere. There are echoes here that reverberate down through history. Milgram's experiments confirmed that faced with legitimate authority, ordinary, sane people will go along with the most appalling behaviour given the right encouragement.

Since this article was first published, I had the good fortune to be introduced to Dr. Philip Zimbardo when he was speaking at a psychology conference at the Emmanuel Centre in London on 25 March 2014.

One of the things that struck me was the enthusiasm of the students – three and a half thousand of them, mainly between 17 and 20 years old – an enthusiasm bordering on hero-worship – and the high esteem in which he was held by some of the world's leading psychologists. In fact, he was introduced as *'Dr. Philip Zimbardo, who is probably the world's greatest living psychologist'*. And so it was that after his talk, I reconsidered some of my opinions about the Stanford Experiment.

Zimbardo is a charming man. He is accompanied by his wife, Christina Maslach, an internationally recognised psychologist in her own right. At school, he was in the same class as Stanley Milgram, and he naturally has high praise for his colleague's contribution to psychology. He is concerned about climate change, angry about the abuse of children by Catholic priests and furious about his own government's actions in Iraq. He appears on stage in baggy trousers, sneakers and t-shirt. Zimbardo has time for everyone. I suspect he enjoys being the world's greatest living psychologist – and secretly, so would I to be fair. His audience hangs on to his every word. And yet Zimbardo also seems haunted by Stanford and the experiment that earned him the notoriety which nearly ruined him.

He explains that when the experiment was conceived, no one had the slightest inkling of the way it would eventually turn out. He points out that the experiment was not part of Stanford University Psychology Department's curriculum, but it was run during a summer school held at Stanford.

When asked whether he thought the experiment would be allowed today, Zimbardo was forthright in his defence of the circumstances of its inception. In fact, the University had given their permission for the project to go ahead – after all, it was just a bunch of kids playing cops and robbers! Zimbardo insists that as with any other laboratory (as opposed to field) psychology experiment, participants were given the opportunity to withdraw at any time by saying 'I no longer wish to take part in this experiment', and yet none of them did.

He admitted that if they had run the experiment today, the mothers of those kids would have sued him and the University. And when things got out of control, the experimenters were so amazed by the behaviour they were observing, so involved in the study, they were unable to spot that a line had been crossed. I can understand this because I have seen stage hypnosis go the same way... A tried and tested routine takes an unexpected, but funny, turn and everyone goes along with it, laughing and ad libbing, until all of a sudden, something totally unexpected happens and the laughter suddenly turns to horror as some terrible secret is revealed. And there was the inexperienced stage hypnotist in America, booked to appear at a college show. He managed to hypnotise over a hundred students before other students

stared passing out all over the auditorium. Mass hysteria ensued, teachers became concerned, students started crying, and things got totally out of control.

It was Christina Maslach who persuaded Zimbardo to call a halt. She says that had it been anyone else in charge, she would have walked away and left them to it – that's what she was tempted to do – but it was her love and respect for Zimbardo that made her stand her ground and persuade him to end the experiment. *'These were just kids!' she says.*

There is no doubt that Mr & Mrs Zimbardo are close – their body language says it all – and she was certainly the steadying influence that saved Zimbardo from getting into real trouble. Had the experiment been allowed to run its course, there could have been real problems.

On this rainy Tuesday in central London, Zimbardo's message rings out loud and clear in the packed hall. We all have the ability to make a difference by standing up for what's right. In this way, we can all defeat evil. We can all be heroes! In this way, Zimbardo makes absolution from the mistakes of Stanford and I admire him for being so honest.

So has my encounter with Dr. Zimbardo changed my thinking about the Stanford Experiment?

It has certainly increased my awareness of its importance. Walking from the Emmanuel Centre, past the Houses of Parliament to catch the tube, I was so deep in thought, I nearly got run over by a police car. And I have since discovered that Zimbardo, whether by accident or design, has got me thinking about some more important issues.

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