

Conformity to Social Roles: Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment

AQA A-Level Psychology – Social Influence

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What are Social Roles?

Definition

Parts individuals play as members of a social group, with expectations about behaviour.

Examples

Teacher, parent, student, prison guard.

Impact

When people conform to social roles, their behaviour can change drastically.



Zimbardo et al. (1973) – The Stanford Prison Experiment

Aim

To investigate how readily people would conform to guard and prisoner roles in a simulated prison environment.

Key Question

Would participants behave according to dispositional traits or situational influences?

Procedure and Findings

Procedure of Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment

- **Participants:**
24 emotionally stable male volunteers were selected from a larger pool of applicants who responded to a newspaper advert. They were screened for psychological health.
- **Random Assignment:**
Participants were randomly assigned to the role of either prisoner or guard.
- **Setting:**
A mock prison was set up in the basement of Stanford University's psychology department.
- **Prisoners:**
 - Were arrested at home by real police and taken to the mock prison.
 - Stripped, deloused, given uniforms and assigned ID numbers.
 - Had limited rights (e.g., scheduled meals, toilet visits, and supervised time outdoors).
- **Guards:**
 - Wore khaki uniforms, reflective sunglasses (to prevent eye contact), and carried batons.
 - Had complete control over the prisoners' daily routines.
- **Duration:**
The study was planned to last two weeks, but was terminated after 6 days due to ethical concerns.

Findings of the Experiment

- **Rapid Role Internalisation:**
Both guards and prisoners quickly adopted their roles. Guards became increasingly abusive, humiliating and harassing prisoners.
- **Prisoner Reactions:**
 - Some prisoners showed signs of severe emotional distress, crying and becoming withdrawn.
 - One prisoner was released on Day 2 due to extreme psychological disturbance.
 - Others showed signs of learned helplessness and passivity.
- **Deindividuation:**
Uniforms and identification numbers led to a loss of personal identity, especially in prisoners.
- **Loss of Morality:**
Even Zimbardo, acting as the prison superintendent, became too involved and failed to stop the abuse early.
- **Conclusion:**
The study demonstrated the power of situational factors and social roles in shaping behaviour. Ordinary people can conform to roles of authority or submission when placed in a dehumanising environment.

Strenghts and Limitations

Strengths of Zimbardo's Study

High Control Over Variables

The study was a lab experiment, meaning Zimbardo had control over variables such as participant selection and role allocation. This increased internal validity, as changes in behaviour can more confidently be attributed to the social roles rather than individual differences.

Realism of the Situation (High Mundane Realism)

Prisoners were arrested at home by real police, which enhanced realism. Participants reported feeling that the situation was real, increasing the psychological realism of the study.

Practical Applications

The findings have been used to understand real-world abuses, such as those at Abu Ghraib prison, showing how institutional settings can lead to brutal behaviour. The study has contributed to reforms in prison policies and raised awareness of ethical guidelines in psychological research.

Limitations of Zimbardo's Study

Lack of Informed Consent and Right to Withdraw

Participants were not fully informed about what would happen (e.g., being arrested at home). Although they were told they could withdraw, in practice this was discouraged (e.g., Zimbardo acted as superintendent and persuaded prisoners to stay).

Ethical Issues

Participants experienced psychological harm, including emotional breakdowns and humiliation. The study was ended early (after 6 days) due to the extreme stress some participants experienced, suggesting poor ethical oversight.

Demand Characteristics

Critics argue that participants may have simply been acting in line with stereotypes (e.g., guards imitating prison movies), meaning behaviour might not reflect genuine conformity. This threatens the ecological validity of the findings.

Lack of Generalisability

The study only used male, American college students, meaning results may not apply to women or other cultures. The artificial prison setting may not reflect real-life prisons or wider societal roles.

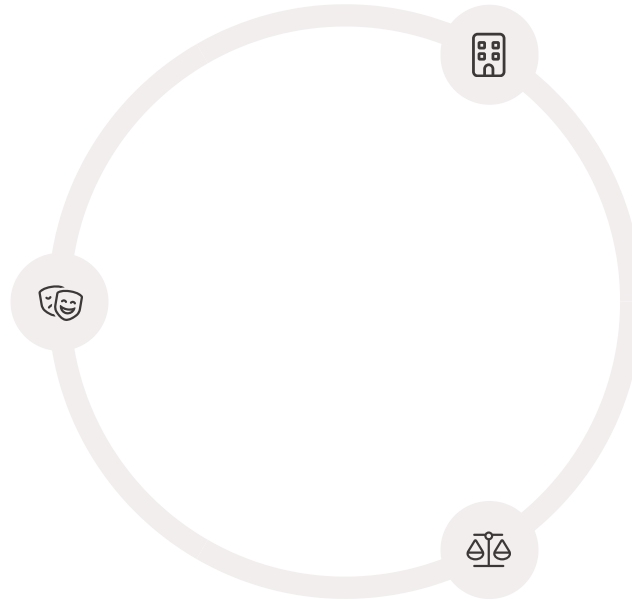
Zimbardo's Dual Role

Zimbardo was both researcher and prison superintendent, creating a conflict of interest. This dual role may have impaired his objectivity and ethical responsibility, as he did not intervene early enough to stop the harm.

Conclusions

Social Role Conformity

People readily conform to social roles, even against their usual moral code.



Situational Influence

Behaviour was strongly influenced by situational factors, not personality.

Environmental Override

Environment can override personal values when roles and power dynamics are enforced.

Reicher and Haslam (2006) – BBC Prison Study

Aim

To investigate how people respond to assigned roles of guard and prisoner in a simulated prison environment, and to test whether the findings of Zimbardo's study would be replicated under modern conditions and ethical guidelines.

Procedure

- **Participants:**
15 male volunteers were selected through extensive screening for physical and psychological health. They were randomly assigned to the role of prisoner or guard.
- **Setting:**
A mock prison was created inside a specially constructed set and filmed for BBC television over 8 days.
- **Conditions:**
Ethical guidelines were strictly followed. Participants had:
 - Informed consent
 - The right to withdraw at any time
 - Regular psychological checks
 - Oversight by an ethics committee
- **Structure:**
Guards had control over food, resources, and privileges, while prisoners wore uniforms and were given ID numbers.

Findings

- **Role Adoption:**
Unlike in Zimbardo's study, the guards did not conform to their roles with aggression or assertiveness. Instead, they were reluctant to use their power and failed to maintain authority.
- **Group Identity:**
The prisoners developed a strong group identity, leading to increased collective resistance. Over time, they became more empowered, and the power dynamic shifted.
- **Collapse of the Regime:**
The prison system eventually broke down, and both groups tried to create a more equal society, which also failed. This led to uncertainty and instability.

Conclusion

- The study challenges Zimbardo's conclusion that people naturally conform to oppressive roles.
- Instead, it supports Social Identity Theory: people's behaviour depends on whether they identify with their group and its goals.
- Power is not automatically accepted—it depends on shared group norms and leadership.

Evaluation/Discussion

Demand Characteristics

Details of the SPE was given to students unaware of the research, and they predicted that the purpose of the research was to show how normal people assigned to either prisoner or guard would act like real ones and that the guards would be hostile.

Banuaizi and Movahedi (1975) argued that the behaviour of the subjects was a consequence of demand characteristics rather than conformity to social roles.

Ethics

The SPE followed the university guidelines from the ethics committee. However, many of the subjects showed signs of emotional distress. Zimbardo did carry out debriefing sessions for many years post study, and concluded there were no long lasting effects.

Reicher and Haslam mirrored Zimbardo's study, however they had an ethics committee 24/7 and therefore minimised the harm.

Abu Gharib

Conformity to social roles could help to explain the treatment of real prisoners in Iraq by US soldiers between 2003-2004. Zimbardo argued the soldiers were the victims of situational factors rather than dispositional ones.

This could include a lack of training, boredom and not being accountable to anyone in higher authority.

Reicher and Haslam

- **Ethical Improvements:**

Unlike Zimbardo's study, this experiment followed strict ethical guidelines, including informed consent, right to withdraw, and regular psychological checks.

- **Real-World Relevance:**

It offers insights into how power and group identity work in modern society, and supports Social Identity Theory, which has wider applications in understanding group behaviour and leadership.

- **Lack of Realism:**

Being filmed for TV may have led participants to perform for the cameras rather than act naturally (low ecological validity).

- **Small Sample Size:**

Only 15 male participants were used, limiting generalisability to wider populations, including women and other cultures.

Questions

- Outline Zimbardo's study of conformity to social roles (4)
- Outline the key findings from Zimbardo's SPE (4)
- Outline the findings of one study of conformity to social roles (4)
- Write a definition of conformity (2)
- Outline and evaluate Zimbardo and/or Reicher and Haslam's prison experiment (16)

