

Stanford Prison Experiment

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Volunteers

What suspects had done was to answer a local newspaper ad calling for volunteers in a study of the psychological effects of prison life. We wanted to see what the psychological effects were of becoming a prisoner or prison guard. To do this, we decided to set up a simulated prison and then carefully note the effects of this institution on the behavior of all those within its walls.

More than 70 applicants answered our ad and were given diagnostic interviews and personality tests to eliminate candidates with psychological problems, medical disabilities, or a history of crime or drug abuse. Ultimately, we were left with a sample of 24 college students from the U.S. and Canada who happened to be in the Stanford area and wanted to earn \$15/day by participating in a study. On all dimensions that we were able to test or observe, they reacted normally.

Our study of prison life began, then, with an average group of healthy, intelligent, middle-class males. These boys were arbitrarily divided into two groups by a flip of the coin. Half were randomly assigned to be guards, the other to be prisoners. It is important to remember that at the beginning of our experiment there were no differences between boys assigned to be a prisoner and boys assigned to be a guard.



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Stanley Milgram's Biography

Now Available!

The Man Who Shocked the World

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Controversy surrounded Stanley Milgram for much of his professional life as a result of a series of experiments on obedience to authority which he conducted at Yale University in 1961-1962. He found, surprisingly, that 65% of his subjects, ordinary residents of New Haven, were willing to give apparently harmful electric shocks-up to 450 volts-to a pitifully protesting victim, simply because a scientific authority commanded them to, and in spite of the fact that the victim did not do anything to deserve such punishment. The victim was, in reality, a good actor who did not actually receive shocks, and this fact was revealed to the subjects at the end of the experiment. But, during the experiment itself, the experience was a powerfully real and gripping one for most participants.

Milgram's career also produced other creative, though less controversial, research; such as, the small-world method (the source of "Six Degrees of Separation"), the lost-letter technique, mental maps of cities, cyranoids, the familiar stranger, and an experiment testing the effects of televised antisocial behavior which, though conducted 30 years ago, remains unique to the present day.



Linsly-Chittenden Hall , Yale University, where most of the obedience experiments were conducted.

Photographed by Alan C. Elms.