

# Stanford Prison Experiment



*What happens when experiments are misplanned*

*Giovanni Viviani*



# Stanford Prison Experiment



*Why do we need ethics standards in research*

*Giovanni Viviani*

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# Stanford Prison Experiment

Study of psychological effect of becoming a prisoner or a prison guard

Conducted at Stanford University, August 1971, by professor Philip Zimbardo

One of the most criticised experiment of history

Often related to Abu Ghraib prison scandal

# Stanford Prison Experiment

24 males participants, chosen to exclude those with a criminal background

Participants were divided in 2 groups, prisoners and prison guards, arbitrarily assigned by Zimbardo

The experiment was planned to last for 2 weeks

More than 50 researchers observed the experiment



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYtX2sEaeFE>

Real policemen were involved to arrest the prisoners

Prisoners were brought to the police station to take fingerprints and mug shots

Prisoners were then transferred to a mockup prison in the basement of Jordan Hall

Prisoners were strip searched, chained, assigned a number and closed in their cells

Guards were given wooden batons, a uniform and mirrored sunglasses



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3wxEmHqVCY>



"... the guards were told to routinely performs counts..."

"...it provided a regular occasion for the guards to interact with and exercise control over the prisoners..."

The second morning a rebellion started when the prisoner of one cell barricaded themselves inside

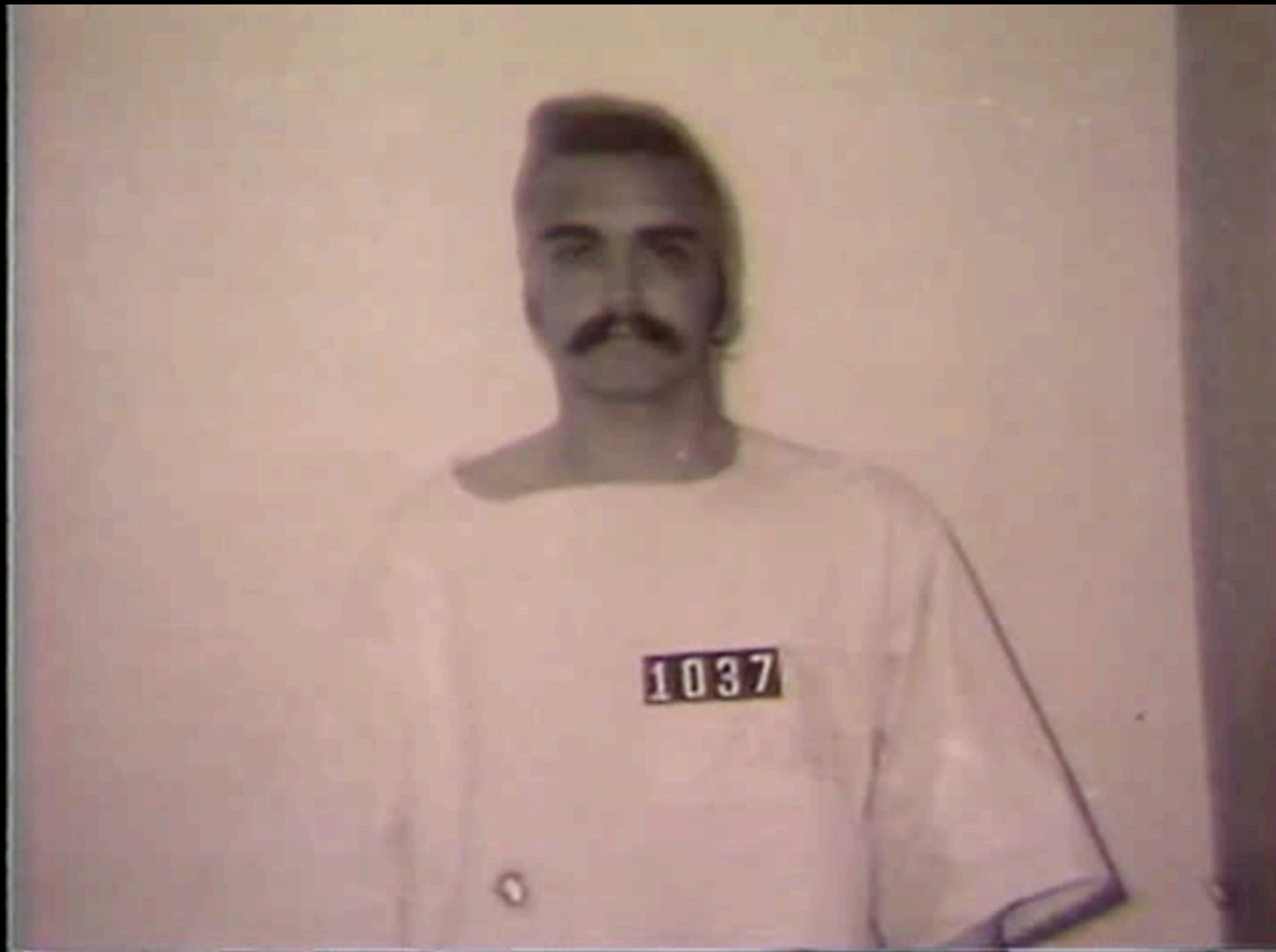
After putting the rebellion down guard started using psychological and physical punishment to keep prisoners under control

During the second day, Prisoner #8612 started breaking down

He showed acute emotional disturbance, disorganised thinking, uncontrollable crying and rage

The researched decided that he was just trying to fool them and told him it was not possible to quit

Additionally, he was offered to become an informer for the guard in exchange of for no further harassment



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbDy4ZtB2fU>

During the fourth day a rumour spreads among the guards that the released prisoner #8612 is planning a mass escape for the other prisoners

Zimbardo put one of his graduate students as informer in #8612 cell.

In addition it moves all the prisoners to another floor and prepares to receive #8612

#8612 doesn't show up, but instead a student shows up because he heard they were running an experiment

This student asks Zimbardo a simple question: "What is the independent variable in this study?"

Zimbardo gets angry at him because he was dealing with a prison break

The rumor turns out to be just a rumor, so the guards react by increasing harassment toward prisoners



Zimbardo decides to invite a priest to talk with the prisoners

All the prisoners answer him that the only way they have to get out of there is through a lawyer to get a parole

Prisoner #819 refused initially. He was feeling sick, had refused to eat and wanted to see a doctor

He was later convinced to talk with the priest, but broke down completely and Zimbardo decided to release him.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ol1KB-rlqA>

The following day, a Parole Board is organised. The board is mostly composed by graduate students

Most of the prisoners declared to be ready to forfeit their compensation in order to get parole, even though they could have simply quit the experiment.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uczcm1RGlPg>

Christina Maslach, a graduate student, gets introduced to the experiment to conduct interviews

She objected to the conditions of the prison, and Zimbardo decided to terminate the experiment

They eventually married.



Of the 50 researchers that were supervising the experiment, no one had question its morality

Zimbardo thought until the end that the experiment was running fine and there was no problem

No consent form was signed by the participants.  
Zimbardo justification is that it was impossible to predict what would have happened

Four participants had to leave after showing signs of emotional disorder that could have had lasting consequences

Participants playing the role of prisoners were not protected from psychological and physical harm

Zimbardo had access to all videos and data and was able to publish his result without being questioned on them

# Abu Ghraib

Huge scandal regarding torture and prisoner abuse in the American prison of Abu Ghraib in Iraq, March 2003

Zimbardo stated that he was struck by the similarity with his own experiment

Eventually, he became involved with the defence team representing one of the prison guards



## I was a Guard in the 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment. AMA!

UNIQUE EXPERIENCE

submitted 20 days ago \* by StanfordPrisonGuard

**My short bio:** My name is John Mark and I was a guard in the [Stanford Prison Experiment](#). Picture of me at the time: <http://i.imgur.com/ooByQAZ.jpg>

A good article from Stanford Magazine that describes various perspectives, including my own:

[Article](#)

I have also written several letters to the editor of Stanford magazine which describe my experience, for additional background:

[Letter 1](#)

[Letter 2](#)

[Letter 3](#)

And a reflection from Zimbardo on my remarks:

[Response](#)

**My Proof:** <http://imgur.com/a/68OAW>

I'm here with my nephew helping me out with the reddit stuff. AMA!

Thanks to [/u/bachiavelli](#) for the [AMA Request!](#)

EDIT: I'm signing off now, but I appreciate the questions and the interest for something that happened long before a lot of you were probably even born. In the 1900's, [Piltown man](#) was discovered as a major archeological discovery before it was disproven after more than 50 years of common acceptance. I make the reference because, at least in my opinion, the Prison Experiment will one day suffer a similar fate, if it hasn't already. Thanks everyone for taking the time and for the questions!

*Do you think any good came from the experience?*

Honestly, I think it would have been better if it had never happened. It introduced a concept of innate human evil into accepted common wisdom that I don't believe to be true and I especially don't believe that experiment to be the proof of that.



*Is there a particular moment from the experiment that has stayed with you the most?*

It was unfortunately that after the experiment we never had a full group debriefing. Rather, I can't speak for the prisoners, but the guards met with the researchers after the experiment. During the debrief, we were encouraged to say bad things about the prisoners. [...], I got up and walked through a side door. When I opened the door, I saw all the prisoners watching us through a one-way mirror [...]

*What is something that most people don't understand about the experiment that you think is important to know?*

[...] that the lead researcher who is suppose to be impartial was the prison warden making all the important decisions every step of the way[...]

I don't think most people realize that lots of the tension created in the experiment came from sleep deprivation and waking prisoners in the middle of the night for prisoner counts. This is a form of internationally recognized torture. [...] Zimbardo and his staff allowed and encourage this behavior[...]

# Follow up

## *La Gabbia*

1977, Carlo Tuzii, a film about the experiment adapted to an Italian environment

## *Quiet Rage: The Stanford Prison Experiment*

1992, a documentary written by Zimbardo

## *Black Box*

2001, a novel inspired by the experiment

## *Das Experiment*

2001, a german film about the experiment

## *The Experiment*

2010, english remake of the german film

# Similar Experiments

## *BBC Prison Study*

Psychologists Alex Haslam and Steve Reicher conducted a partial replication of the Stanford Experiment in 2006. This was broadcasted by BBC. Their results and conclusion differ completely from Zimbardos conclusions

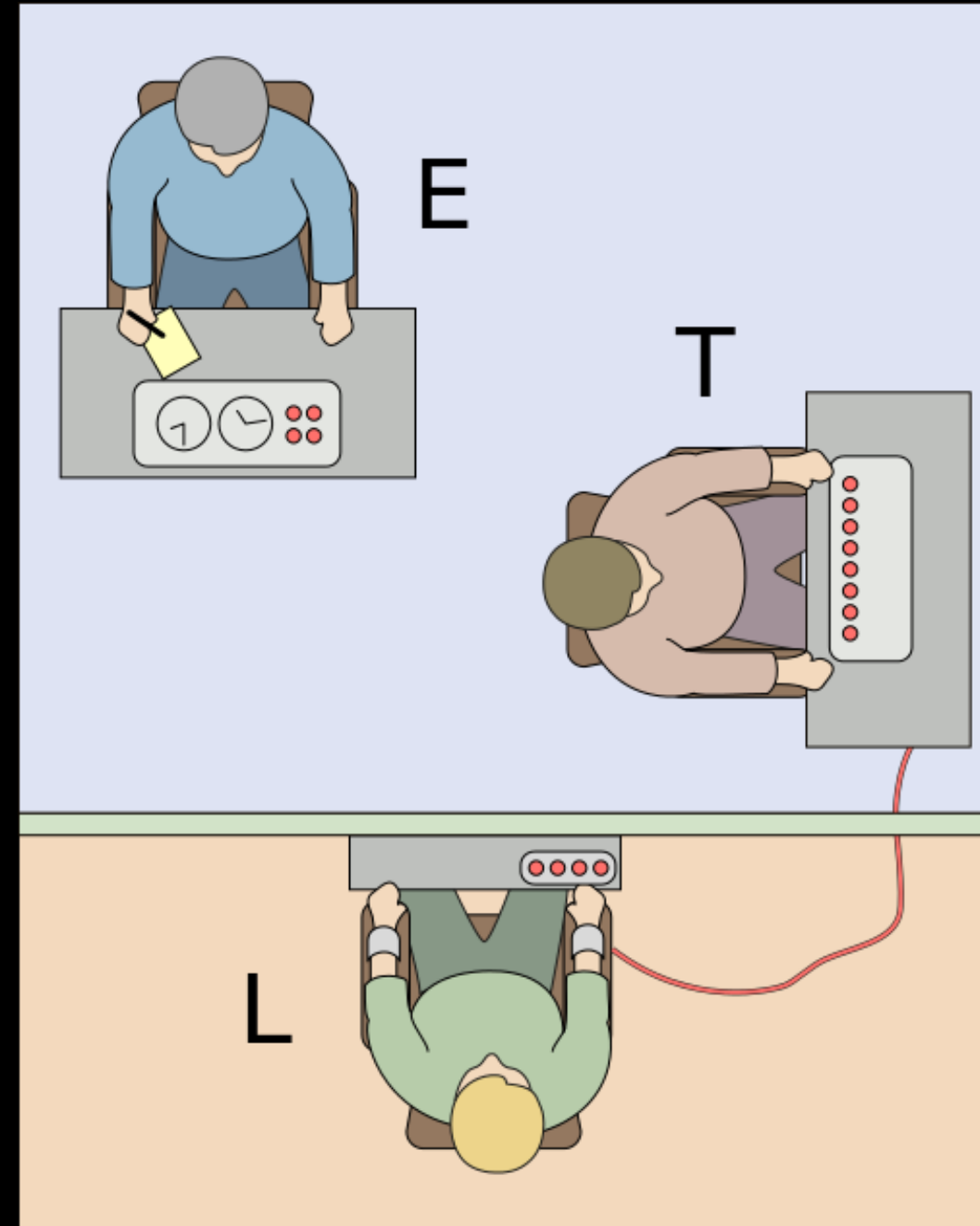
## *The Third Wave*

High school Teacher Ron Jones recreated Nazi Party dynamics through the creation of a social movement. His aim was to explain his students how the German people could accept the actions of the Nazis

# Similar Experiments

## *Milgram Experiment*

This experiment consisted in having the participant submit electric shocks to what he thought was a learner in the case he would answer incorrectly to a question.





I BASE MY VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE ON A SIX DAY LONG STUDY OF 22 NON-RANDOM YOUNG MALES IN WHICH THE EXPERIMENTER WAS AN ACTIVE PARTICIPANT.



This is what I hear when people cite the Zimbardo prison experiment.

# Stanford Prison Experiment



This is why we need ethics standards in research

# Sources

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John Mark AMA

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