

The Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) is one of the most well-known and controversial studies in social psychology. In this study, college students were randomly assigned to act as “guards” or “prisoners” in a fake prison created in the basement of Stanford University. Within a few days, the guards began acting cruelly, while the prisoners became passive and distressed. Based on these events, the researchers concluded that the situation, not the participants’ personalities, caused the abusive behavior. This idea supported the idea that normal people can commit harmful acts when placed in certain roles. However, more recent analyses have raised serious concerns about the study’s scientific methods. These critiques suggest that the original conclusions may not be as strong as once believed.

One major methodological criticism of the Stanford Prison Experiment is the presence of demand characteristics, cues that may have led participants to behave in ways they thought the researchers wanted. According to journalist Ben Blum (2018), the guards were not left to act freely. Instead, they were given a detailed orientation by Zimbardo himself, which encouraged them to dominate the prisoners. Guards were told to create feelings of fear, boredom, and powerlessness. These instructions may have acted as a script, shaping the guards’ behavior. As a result, the abusive actions may not have been caused by the power of the role, but rather by the instructions provided. This weakens the claim that people naturally turn cruel when placed in positions of authority.

This concern was tested in a peer-reviewed study by Bartels (2019), which forms the basis of this essay’s thesis: The original findings of the Stanford Prison Experiment are flawed because the guards’ behavior may have been shaped by expectations set during the orientation, not just by the social role they were given. Rather than showing that all people become abusive

when given power, the study shows that people often act the way they think they are supposed to, especially when those expectations are clearly communicated by an authority figure.

Bartels (2019) tested this idea by giving participants one of two versions of a guard orientation. One version copied the aggressive style of the original Stanford Prison Experiment and told participants they could make prisoners feel powerless. The other version was neutral and gave no behavioral suggestions. After reading the orientation, participants answered questions about how they expected to behave as guards, how they thought other guards would behave, and what they believed the researchers expected of them.

The results clearly supported the hypothesis. Participants who read the aggressive, SPE-style orientation expected both themselves and other guards to act more harshly. They also believed that the researchers wanted this kind of behavior. This shows that the orientation set the tone for expected actions. In other words, the situation alone did not cause the abuse, the instructions and expectations did.

These findings help better understand the flaws in the original Stanford Prison Experiment. The experiment may not reveal a dark truth about human nature, but rather the power of suggestion and authority. When people are told, even subtly, how to behave, they often follow those cues, especially in a research setting. The Bartels (2019) study suggests that the Stanford Prison Experiment's main conclusion, that anyone in power will become abusive, is too simple. Instead, we should see that how people are guided and framed in these situations plays a major role in how they behave.

References

Bartels, J. (2019). Revisiting the Stanford prison experiment, again: Examining demand characteristics in the guard orientation. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 159*(6), 780-790

“The Life of a Lie” by Ben Blum:

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