Beyond Stanford: Questioning a role-based explanation of tyranny

By S. Alexander Haslam and Stephen Reicher

In Spring 2002, The BBC broadcast *The Experiment* (Koppel & Mirsky, 2000), a four-part series that presented some of the findings from a large-scale study designed to explore the social psychology of groups and power. The study received a fair amount of publicity — not all of it well-informed or accurate. This was due in large part to the parallels between the research and the notorious Stanford Prison Experiment conducted by Philip Zimbardo and his colleagues in the early 1970s. As almost every psychology student knows, that earlier study had been conducted in a simulated prison environment, but had to be halted after six days when the brutality of participants who had been randomly assigned to be Guards got out of hand and was seriously compromising the welfare of those participants who had been designated to be Prisoners.

The role account

For Zimbardo's research team, the conclusions to be drawn from this study were disturbingly clear. Because the participants were decent, well-adjusted college students, the findings suggested that anyone would veer towards tyranny if they were given a role as a member of one group that had power over another. As the researchers put it "We did not have to teach the actors how to play their roles" (Zimbardo, Maslach & Haney, 1999, p.206), "Guard aggression ... was emitted simply as a 'natural' consequence of being in the uniform of a 'guard' and asserting the power inherent in that role" (Haney, Banks & Zimbardo, 1973, p. 62).

For the last 30 years, the findings and conclusions of the Stanford study have gone largely unchallenged. Moreover, they have had more impact on the public consciousness than almost any other piece of psychological research. Amongst other things, they have inspired television documentaries (e.g., BBC's *Five Steps to Tyranny*), a film (*Das Experiment*), and even a punk rock band ("Stanford Prison Experiment", whose first self-titled album was released by World Domination Records in 1993). But are those conclusions correct?

Questioning the role account

One of the main problems in answering this question is that there is limited information concerning the details of what happened in the Stanford Study. Amongst other things, this is because the study was never reported in a mainstream social psychology journal. As a result, the most detailed account is that which Zimbardo provides on his own website. However, close scrutiny of the information that is available raises questions about the received analysis.

First, there is plenty of evidence that people did not simply slip into role but actively resisted the situation that had been thrust upon them. Many Guards appear to have resisted the pressure to be brutal. Many Prisoners resisted the authority of the Guards. Indeed, in the first stages of the study, it appears that the Prisoners were ascendant and the Guards felt weak and humiliated. Second, to the extent that the Guards did become brutal, it could be argued that this arose not from a generic drive to abuse power but from the intervention of Zimbardo who had taken on the position of Prison Superintendent. So, on the one hand, the quashing of the Prisoners' resistance and their subsequent passivity can be seen to have arisen from the fact that Zimbardo led the Prisoners to believe that they could not leave the prison. On the other had, any brutality displayed by the Guards can be seen to have followed directly from the instructions that Zimbardo provided — beginning with the following briefing that he gave them at the start of the study:

You can create in the Prisoners feelings of boredom, a sense of fear to some degree, you can create a notion of arbitrariness that their life is totally controlled by us, by the system, you, me and they'll have no privacy... They have no freedom of action they can do nothing, say nothing that we don't permit. We're going to take away their individuality in various ways. In general what all this leads to is a sense of powerlessness. That is, in this situation we'll have all the power and they'll have none (Zimbardo, 1989).

At the very least, the provision of these instructions in which Zimbardo clearly sanctions oppressive treatment of the Prisoners questions the claim that the Guards' roles were not taught. On top of this, note too that he entreats the Guards to act in terms of the group of which he is the leader ("*we're* going to take away *their* individuality", "*we'll* have all the power"; cf. Haslam & Platow, 2003; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996). At the very least, Zimbardo's leadership represents a major confound in the study, that calls into question the internal validity of his analysis

A social identity account

On the basis of the above objections we would argue that the received analysis of the relationship between power, group membership and tyranny is very one-sided. It stresses tyranny but ignores resistance. It stresses the negative side of group behaviour — how groups create social *inequality* — and overlooks the positive side — how collective action can overcome

Beyond Stanford

inequality (Reicher, 1996; Tajfel, 1978). It is also at odds with developments in social psychology that have occurred over the last 30 years and which challenge the idea that people necessarily become mindless and anti-social in groups (e.g., Postmes & Spears, 2001; Spears, Oakes, Ellemers, & Haslam, 1997; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987).

One of the most significant of these developments is *social identity theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory argues that people do not take on group roles uncritically, but do so only after they have internalised them as part of a social identity that is shared with other people. Whether or not this occurs is hypothesised to be a consequence of psychological and social structural factors (e.g., see Turner, 1999). The theory proposes that a shared social identity is the psychological precondition for coordinated collective action. As well as being a basis for dominant groups to assert their power, the theory also argues that social identity can serve as a basis for people to *challenge* subordination and tyranny (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Investigating social identity theory

The BBC Prison Experiment was formulated as an extended field study of the psychology of intergroup inequality from a social identity perspective. It focussed on the conditions under which people *oppose* inequality as well as the conditions under which they *impose* inequality. The primary way that it did this was by manipulating two features of social structure that are hypothesized to encourage members of subordinate groups to relinquish a social mobility belief system (which would lead them to work *individually* to try to improve their situation), and instead adopt a social change belief system (that would lead them to act in terms of social

identity in order to improve their lot *collectively*). These two features were (a) the *permeability* of group boundaries (the extent to which Prisoners believed it was possible to be admitted into the high status group), and (b) the *security* of group relations (the extent to which Prisoners believed status differences in the prison were legitimate and stable).

In the BBC experiment, participants were randomly assigned to Prisoner and Guard groups, as in the Stanford study. However, unlike Zimbardo, we did not take sides in our dealings with the two groups.

Permeability was manipulated by first allowing, and then precluding, opportunities for promotion from Prisoner to Guard. Prior to the promotion taking place, the possibility of individual advancement was expected to encourage a social mobility belief system on the part of Prisoners and acceptance of the status quo. When this was ruled out, we expected Prisoners to adopt a social change belief system and to work collectively to challenge the status of the Guards (see also Ellemers, 1993; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990).

Following this experimental intervention, the security of group relations was manipulated by introducing a Prisoner with a professional background in the field of industrial relations. His arrival was expected to provide participants with a sense of *cognitive alternatives* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) that would encourage them to rethink the nature of Prisoner-Guard relations. In particular, it was expected that his background as an advocate for employees would provide the Prisoners with a rights-based framework for reinterpreting their relationship with the Guards, and for all participants to rethink the nature of their relationship with the experimenters.

Support for the social identity account; Problems for the role account

The effects of these two interventions were observed in the early phases of the experiment. In the first phase, although their conditions were inferior to those of the Guards, the Prisoners worked individually to try to improve their situation (e.g., by vying for promotion), because a strategy of social mobility made sense in light of the permeable group boundaries. However, the Prisoners' sense of collective identity increased after promotion was ruled out and, as predicted, this allowed them to work together to resist and challenge the Guards' authority. After this, the arrival of the new Prisoner and the new framework he provided led the relations between Prisoners and Guards to be renegotiated (to the extent that conflict was replaced with order), and also encouraged the participants as a whole to question the legitimacy of features of the experimental set-up as a whole (in particular, the heat). Importantly too, these (and other) observational findings were consistent with a wealth of psychometric data (e.g., using standard social, clinical and organizational measures) that we collected throughout the study (for details see Haslam & Reicher, 2002; Reicher & Haslam, 2002, in press).

But as well as providing support for these core predictions, the study also generated unexpected findings. These are compatible with the general theoretical thrust of social identity work, but inconsistent with Zimbardo's analysis. The two most significant of these were (a) the discomfort that several of the Guards experienced with their position in the prison and (b) the move to establish a more autocratic regime at the experiment's end (reflected in a general increase in participants' authoritarianism; Altmeyer, 1981).

In regard to the former, there is a fundamental point to be made about the extreme situationism of role accounts. Our Guards were wary about their role because they imagined how others – friends, family, workmates – might

Beyond Stanford

regard them if they acted tyranically. This human capacity for imagination meant that their behaviour was not simply dominated by the immediate context but took other times and places into account. However, of greater interest to us here were the consequences of this in terms of the failure of the Guards to develop a shared sense of social identity. One of the most important findings of the whole study was the way in which it showed that, without a coherent social identity, coherent collective action is impossible. Moreover it further demonstrated that this does not only have consequences on a social level but on an organizational and clinical level (cf., Ellemers, De Gilder & Haslam, in press; Haslam, 2001; Turner & Haslam, 2000). For example, because they couldn't agree on priorities or communication strategies, they found it impossible to plan or even organise themselves, and they therefore became increasingly stressed and burnt-out. So, far from behaving tyrannically, the Guards found any form of order increasingly difficult to impose. Indeed, eventually the Guards' regime was destroyed by a revolt on the part of some Prisoners and the participants collectively agreed to create a Commune. This outcome (the reasons for which we discuss extensively elsewhere; Reicher & Haslam, 2002), obviously challenges Zimbardo's conclusion that powerful roles lead *inevitably* to tyranny.

However, as indicated above, we did glimpse tyranny in our study. Importantly, this appears not have been an inevitable or automatic expression of role — not least because it actively *subverted* both the original roles into which people had been cast and the roles they had adopted in the course of the study. Nonetheless, at the end, participants were close to creating a new and more draconian form of the original structure, albeit with different people as Guards and as Prisoners.

Significantly too, this authoritarian system came to seem more attractive as other systems failed to create order and the participants as a whole came increasingly to desire structure and order. Such findings point to a relationship between groups and tyranny that is very different to the received wisdom in psychology over recent years.

The need for social psychological theory to incorporate social structure and history

One of the problems with the Stanford study is that because Zimbardo himself took on responsibility for creating norms which encouraged tyranny, it provides limited insight into the way in which tyranny might emerge as part of a social process that develops over time. In contrast, the BBC study did allow for such insights and this, we believe, was one of its key strengths. Indeed, in this respect it stands apart from most social psychology experiments in which the impact of group history is denied or overlooked — for the simple reason that such studies are increasingly unlikely to involve social interaction and seldom last longer than half an hour (Haslam & McGarty, 2001).

The BBC study thus encourages researchers to understand the psychology of tyranny in relation to its social, structural and historical underpinnings rather than simply seeing it as the product of fixed psychological or situational determinants – something over which people have no control and therefore for which they have no responsibility. In this regard, the simple role account ('It was the uniform that made me do it') is dangerous not only because it fails to explain tyranny but also because it serves to excuse it.

More specifically, our analysis suggests that tyranny is not the inherent consequence of groups and power but rather of the *failure* of groups and *powerlessness*. It is when people fail to achieve a common social identity that

they feel weak, helpless, humiliated, and resentful of others. It is when people cannot work together to create their own social order that they begin to find something attractive in extreme forms of order imposed by others. We therefore suggest that rather than striving to make people fearful of groups and power (fears that led to the dysfunctionality of the Guards in our study), we should encourage them to work together to develop collective systems that allow them to use power responsibly (see Kanter, 1979; Pfeffer, 1992; Reynolds & Platow, 2003).

An additional point to make about this conclusion is that as well as being in tune with developments in social psychology, it also chimes with the insights of *other* disciplines. It is, for example, compatible with influential accounts of the rise of Nazism provided by Hobsbawm (1995, e.g., p. 127), Gellately, (2001) and Rees (2002). There are multiple points of contact between these account and the unfolding dynamics of our study. Significantly too, like most historical analyses, these dynamics demand a far more sophisticated appreciation of social psychology and its relation to social reality than is provided by the role account.

Opening up debate and moving beyond the Stanford study

We are not the first to suspect that the insights provided by the Stanford study are limited. However, previously, ethical and practical factors made it almost impossible to do the empirical work that might directly interrogate Zimbardo's conclusions. In this respect, the study has stood like a magic box that no-one is allowed to open — and this untouchable quality has only added to the mystique and authority of its contents (for the public and psychology undergraduates, if not for social psychologists).

At the very least, then, by daring to revisit Zimbardo's paradigm (albeit within a much more stringent ethical framework), the BBC Prison

Beyond Stanford

Experiment allows us to reopen debates about the psychological bases of inequality, about how tyranny emerges, and about the conditions under which it is challenged. It raises important points about the methods of psychology and their capacity to help or hinder our understanding of such issues. It also has important theoretical implications concerning the psychology of groups and power.

However, most importantly, it demonstrates the centrality of psychology to essential social debates like those that surround the issue of how to avoid and fight tyranny. Here our most basic message is that oppressors and oppressed are not helpless victims of human nature. Instead, as political and politicized agents, they have abilities, responsibilities, and choices, and these have an important role to play in determining the societies we create and the societies we seek to create. In light of current world events, we think that this message — and the debate that it provokes — has never been more important.

References

Altmeyer, B. (1981). *Right wing authoritarianism*. Winnipeg: University of Manatoba Press.

Ellemers, N. (1993). The influence of socio-structural variables on identity enhancement strategies. *European Review of Social Psychology, 4,* 27-57.

Ellemers, N., de Gilder, D. & Haslam, S. A. (in press). Motivating individuals and groups at work: A social identity perspective on leadership and group performance. *Academy of Management Review.*

Gellately, R. (2001). *Backing Hitler.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Haney, C., Banks, C., & Zimbardo, P. (1973). Interpersonal dynamics in a simulated prison. *International Journal of Criminology and Penology, 1,* 69-97.

Haslam, S. A. (2001). *Psychology in organizations: The social identity approach.* London: Sage.

Haslam, S. A. & McGarty, C. (2001). A hundred years of certitude? Social psychology, the experimental method and the management of scientific uncertainty. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 40,* 1-21.

Haslam, S. A. & Platow, M. J. (2001). The link between leadership and followership: How affirming a social identity translates vision into action. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 27,* 1469-1479.

Haslam, S. A. & Reicher, S. D. (2002). *A study guide to The Experiment — Exploring the psychology of groups and power: Manual to accompany the BBC Video.* London: BBC Worldwide.

Hobsbawm, E. (1995). *Age of extremes: The short twentieth century 1914-1991.* London: Abacus.

Kanter, R. (1979). Power failure in management circuits. *Harvard Business Review,* July-August, 65-75.

Koppel, G. (Series producer) & Mirsky, N. (Executive producer) (2002, May 14, 15, 20, 21), *The Experiment.* London: British Broadcasting Corporation.

Pfeffer, J. (1992). *Managing with power.* Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Postmes, T. & Spears, R. (1998). Deindividuation and anti-normative behavior: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 123,* 238-259.

Rees, L. (2002). *The Nazis: A warning from history.* London: BBC Worldwide.

Reicher, S. D. (1996). Social identity and social change: Rethinking the context of social psychology. In P. Robinson (Ed.), *Social groups and identities: Developing the legacy of Henri Tajfel.* Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Reicher, S. D. & Haslam, S. A. (2002). *Powerless groups and the emergence of tyranny: The BBC Prison Experiment.* Manuscript submitted for publication.

Reicher, S. D. & Haslam, S. A. (2003). Social psychology, science, and surveillance: Understanding *The Experiment. Social Psychological Review, 5,* 7-17.

Reicher, S. D. & Hopkins, N. (1996). Seeking influence through characterising self-categories: An analysis of anti-abortionist rhetoric. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 35,* 297-311.

Reynolds, K. J., & Platow, M. J. (2003). Why power in organizations really should be shared: Understanding power through the perils of powerlessness. In S. A. Haslam, D. van Knippenberg, M. J. Platow, & N. Ellemers (Eds.), *Social identity at work: Developing theory for organizational practice* (pp. 173-188). New York: Psychology Press.

Spears, R., Oakes, P. J., Ellemers, N. & Haslam S. A. (Eds.) (1997). *The social psychology of stereotyping and group life.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Tajfel. H. (1978) The achievement of group differentiation. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), *Differentiation between social groups: Studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations.* London: Academic Press.

Tajfel, H. & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33-47). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Turner, J. C. (1999). Some current issues in research on social identity and self-categorization theories. In N. Ellemers, R. Spears, & B. Doosje (Eds.), *Social identity: Context, commitment, content* (pp. 6-34). Oxford: Blackwell.

Turner, J. C. & Haslam, S. A. (2001). Social identity, organizations and leadership. In M. E. Turner (Ed.), *Groups at work: Advances in theory and research* (pp. 25-65). Hills-dale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., & Wetherell, M. S. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Wright, S. C., Taylor, D. M., & Moghaddam, F. M. (1990). Responding to membership in a disadvantaged group: From acceptance to collective protest. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 58,* 994-1003.

Zimbardo, P. (1989). *Quiet rage: The Stanford Prison Study video.* Stanford CA: Stanford University.

Zimbardo, P. G., Maslach, C., & Haney, C. (1999). Reflections on the Stanford Prison Experiment: Genesis, transformations, consequences. In T. Blass (Ed.), *Obedience to authority: Current perspectives on the Milgram paradigm* (pp. 193-237). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. ∎