

The BBC Prison Study

Selected Quotations

On the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE): Theory, critique and implications

1. "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, discussing findings of the SPE)



3. "The idea that groups with power automatically become tyrannical ignores the active *leadership* that the experimenters provided [in the SPE]. Zimbardo told his guards: 'You can create in the prisoners ... a sense of fear to some degree, you can create a notion of arbitrariness that their life is totally controlled by us.... They'll 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.'" (Haslam & Reicher, 2005)

4. "It is not, as Zimbardo suggests, the guards who wrote their own scripts on the blank canvas of the SPE, but Zimbardo who created the script of terror." (Banyard, 2007)
5. "The fact that Zimbardo's analysis [is] invoked in order to deny responsibility for acts of appalling brutality should serve as a warning to social psychology. For it points to the way that our theories are used to justify and normalize oppression, rather than to problematize it and identify ways in which it can be overcome. In short, representing abuse as 'natural' makes us apologists for the inexcusable." (Haslam & Reicher, 2006)
6. "Behind the tyranny of the prison guards and the abasement of the prisoners in the SPE, there is a view of human beings as the psychological prisoners of society ... working out of a dysfunctional and inescapable human nature.... Social psychology spends much of its time explaining how society is reproduced, how the present recapitulates the past and very little on the other half of the problem, how and why society changes.... Society is not a psychological prison but a means of expanding human possibilities. A reorientation of theoretical emphasis is overdue." (Turner, 2006)

On the BBC Prison Study: Rationale and findings

7. "The BBC Prison Study was designed to examine the factors that determine how people respond when a system of inequality is imposed upon them by others. At the start, almost all the participants rejected this system. However, by the end, they were close to instituting a new and more tyrannical social system.... This raises a new and unexpected issue. What are the conditions under which people create a system of inequality for themselves?" (Reicher & Haslam, 2006)
8. "People do not automatically act in terms of group memberships or roles ascribed by others." (Reicher & Haslam, 2006)
9. "[Shared] social identity was a source of strength and resilience for the prisoners just as its absence was a basis for weakness and disintegration among the guards. United, the prisoners overcame their stress; divided, the guards buckled." (Haslam & Reicher, 2006)
10. "Failing groups almost inevitably create a host of problems for their own members and for others. These problems have a deleterious impact on organization, on individuals' clinical state and ... on society. For it is when people cannot create a social system for themselves that they will more readily accept extreme solutions proposed by others." (Reicher & Haslam, 2006)
11. "Authoritarians are only able to exercise leadership and set about creating an authoritarian world when circumstances move them from a position of extremism to one where they represent the wider group." (Haslam & Reicher, 2007)



On the BBC Prison Study: Relevance for psychology and society

12. "One of the significant achievements of the BBC Prison Study is to show that, if sufficient care is taken, it is possible to run powerful and impactful field studies into social processes that are also ethical." (Reicher & Haslam, 2006)



13. "The rather remarkable conclusion of this simulated prison experience is that the prisoners dominated the guards! The guards became increasingly paranoid, depressed and stressed ... Several of the guards could not take it any more and quit. The prisoners soon established the upper hand, working as a team to undermine the guards What is the external validity of such events in any real prison anywhere in the known universe? In what kind of prisons are prisoners in charge? How could such an eventuality become manifest?" (Zimbardo, 2006, commenting on the BBC Prison Study)

14. "In most prisons, even those where correctional authorities make a reasonable effort to maintain control of their charges, an inmate hierarchy exists by which certain prisoners enjoy a great deal of power.... This power imbalance is of course much more marked in prisons where the authorities have ceded effective control to the inmate population, an all too common occurrence." (Human Rights Watch, 2001, from a report on US State Prisons)
15. "The inmates seemed to be running the prison not the authorities." (Nelson Mandela, 1994, reflecting on his time imprisoned on Robben Island)
16. "The optimal conditions for the triumph of the ultra-right were an old state and its ruling mechanisms which could no longer function; a mass of disenchanting, disoriented and disorganized citizens who no longer knew where their loyalties lay; strong socialist movements threatening or appearing to threaten social revolution, but not actually in a position to achieve it.... These were the conditions that turned movements of the radical right into powerful, organized and sometimes uniformed and paramilitary force." (Eric Hobsbawm writing on the rise of Fascism in 1930s Germany).
17. "Our purpose is not to replace an analysis that sees prisons as inevitable sites of tyranny with one that represents them as inevitable sites of resistance. Rather, our dual objective has been to show that resistance is every bit as 'natural' as tyranny, and to attempt to understand the social psychological processes that determine the relative impact of these countervailing forces." (Haslam & Reicher, 2009)



Sources:

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