



Commentary

On rethinking the psychology of tyranny: The BBC prison study

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This commentary offers a critical evaluation of the scientific legitimacy of research generated by television programming interests. It challenges the validity of claims advanced by these researchers regarding the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) and highlights the biases, fallacies and distortions in this study conducted for BBC-TV that attempted a partial replication of my earlier experiment.

I have reluctantly accepted the editor's invitation to prepare this commentary on my evaluation of *Rethinking the psychology of tyranny: The BBC Prison Study*, following my reviewer's judgment of it as not acceptable for publication in any scientific journal. It is rarely productive to engage in such public debate without undermining the integrity of our discipline in the process. However, across their many publications, these authors have insisted on using the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) as their 'straw situation' to give visibility and conceptual legitimacy to their scientifically irresponsible 'made-for-TV-study'. Thereby, they have forced me to counter their allegations in the BJSP, less to defend my research than to publicly highlight the inherent inadequacies, exaggerated claims and outright falsehoods being perpetrated by their insistence on making much ado about what should be nothing of scientific merit.

After briefly describing my privileged position in this matter, giving a synopsis of this study from my view point, mentioning some fundamental differences between the SPE and the BBC study, I will outline a short selection of reasons why I believe this alleged 'social psychology field study' is fraudulent and does not merit acceptance by the social psychological community in Britain, the United States or anywhere except in media psychology. A detailed, expansive chronology of the SPE will finally be published in my book, *The Lucifer Effect: Why Good People Turn Evil* (Random House/Ebury Press, London, 2006)

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My privileged vantage point

I was originally contacted by the BBC staff to be their primary consultant on this TV show in their attempted replication of the simulated prison experiment that I had conducted with Craig Haney and Curt Banks in 1971. I refused because I felt the reason for their wanting to make such a show was based on the dramatic demonstrations of prisoner abuse by the guards in our research. It might make interesting television, but is unethical to do so again either in academic research or in such media re-creations. When the producers indicated they were determined to proceed with this replication, I recommended that my British colleague, Mark McDermott, be hired to help organize an ethics committee with power to stop the study if similar abuses occurred; such an oversight group was formed and was active. I also was allowed to view their final 4-hour video production (and have made a detailed analysis of the events and reactions portrayed there). In addition, I have been in contact with several of the BBC study prisoners and one guard, have reviewed a web site that some participants created, and also spent a day in personal discussion with Phil 'Bimmo' Bimpson, the leader of the prisoner rebellion, about what really happened from his insider's perspective.

Synopsis of the BBC attempted replication

Fifteen adult men (aged 22 to 44) from the United Kingdom were recruited by national advertisements for 'The Experiment' with headlines, 'How well do you really know yourself?' Those selected from 500 who answered the ad would take part in a 'university-backed social science experiment to be shown on TV' that promised 'to change the way you think'.¹ The volunteers were warned that there would be exposure to 'exercise, tasks, hardship, hunger, solitude and anger'. Of the 15 men, 9 were randomly assigned (allegedly) to be prisoners, with 6 playing guards. They were given background questionnaires, and BBC staff visually evaluated some. A high-tech, good-looking prison set was constructed at the George Lucas sound stage of BBC's Elstree studios (Hertfordshire) to allow monitoring by the researchers, ethics committee and of course for optimal audio and video-recording at all times. The study was projected to last 10 days but was terminated a few days earlier. After considerable editing by the BBC producers, some of it forced by critical preview reactions of the former prisoners, the research was broadcast (May, 2002) on BBC television as a series of four 1-hour programmes entitled, 'The Experiment' (Koppel & Mirsky, 2002).²

Once in the mock prison, prisoners were given orange jump suits, with lapel microphones attached, a prisoner number and their heads were shaved. Three of them occupied each of the attractive well-lit cells provided with books and games. The guards lived in separate quarters in military style uniforms. There were no pre-arranged guard rules governing what the prisoners must and must not do.

Basic differences between SPE and BBC-E

- Our participants were young college students; theirs were older men from varied backgrounds.

¹ Wells, M. (Jan. 24, 2002). BBC halts 'prison experiment'. *The Guardian Unlimited*, on-line.

² Koppel, G., & Mirsky, N. (Series producer and Executive producer, respectively). (2002 May, 14, 15, 20, 21). *The Experiment*. London: BBC.

- Our study began with simulated arrests by real local police; theirs began by volunteers arriving on their own.
- Our study had an institutional authority hierarchy as well as planned sets of prison-like corresponding agencies and events. We had a prison superintendent, warden and psychological counsellors arrayed above the prisoners and guards. Theirs had only the two experimenters prominently dominating the action. We had a parole board, disciplinary board, visits by a prison chaplain and legal public defender, parents and friends visiting nights and continued involvement of city and university police. They had none of that.
- Our study began with the guards and warden formulating a set of coercive rules governing all aspects of prisoner behaviour. They had none.
- In our study, video-recording was concealed and never apparent to participants, and none wore microphones to make them aware of being under surveillance. In theirs, it was obvious that everything was being recorded at all times.
- In our study, the researchers rarely had direct contact with the prisoners or guards in their role as researchers, with minimal intrusion into the prisoner-guard dynamics. In theirs, the researchers continually intervened, made regular broadcasts into the prison facility, administered daily psychological assessments, arranged contests for the best prisoners to compete to become guards' and as in all reality TV shows, created daily 'confessionals' for participants to talk directly to the camera about their feelings.
- Our study was conceptualized around a psychology of imprisonment modelled after typical prisons in the US where staff and guards exert dominating influence over prisoners. Their study seemed to be based on a model of a commune where power is distributed and decisions negotiated democratically.
- Our study randomly assigned participants to the two treatments. Their alleged 'random assignment' yielded two very different-seeming groups from the very start of their study.
- In our study, some prisoners had to be released early because they could not take the abuse any more. In the BBC study, some *guards* quit early because they could not stand their abuse any longer.

Fast forward to the conclusion of the BBC-TV study

The rather remarkable conclusion of this simulated prison experience is that the prisoners dominated the guards! The guards became 'increasingly paranoid, depressed and stressed and complained most of being bullied!'³ 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, to challenge and tease them, and even to limit access to their cells and get better food. Then, everyone got together and decided to form a peaceful 'commune', but several dissident prisoners disrupted it. The study was terminated a bit earlier than planned because a coup from a subgroup of prisoners was about to take place to create a more authoritarian prison-like atmosphere.

What is the external validity of such events in any real prison anywhere in the known universe? In what kind of prisons are the prisoners in charge? How could such an eventuality become manifest?

³ Derbyshire, D. (May 3, 2002). *When they played guards and prisoners in the US, it got nasty. In Britain, they became friends.* *The Daily Telegraph*, p. 3.

What went wrong with the BBC experiment?

In the design and execution of the SPEs my colleagues and I were invested in creating a general atmosphere that was a functional simulation of the psychological nature of being imprisoned, which included minimizing the voluntary experimental aspect of the situation to the participants. Over time, our guards and prisoners never referred to their experience as an experiment, it became prison-like in many ways. Not only were our guards always in control of the situation, many continually invented new ways to increasingly dominate the prisoners.

None of that transformative experience was ever evident in what I have seen and heard of the BBC experiment – for obvious reasons. From the start, everyone knew this was a made-for-TV study; that everything they did would be shown on national British television – for better or for worse. Next, the demands of good television production values – getting quality audio and video and well-lit close-ups even when a prisoner is in solitary confinement – undermine or at least interfere with scientific production values of creating ‘mundane realism’ within an admittedly artificial environment. Finally, for inexplicable reasons, the researchers made themselves a dominantly intrusive constant element into the research setting. Instead of being content to be just scientific observers, they became ‘players’, perhaps at the instigation of the producers, to make things happen each day that might be interesting. Their intrusions forced the participants to be constantly aware that what they were experiencing was just that ‘social science experiment to be shown on TV’ that had attracted their initial attention from the televised lure for participants.

I would like to elaborate these points in more detail and raise a few others. This final part of my Commentary is organized around the issues of: random assignment; failure to create the psychologically necessary situational conditions for the treatment variable to be meaningful; the Heisenberg indeterminacy principle; reality-concealing rhetoric, data cautions and the values conflict between TV and scientific research.

- *Alleged Random Assignment.* The prisoners’ backgrounds were very different from those of the guards: ex-crack addict, martial arts expert, security expert, former army officer and the only black participant. They had more ‘street smarts’ to begin, and used assertive Machiavellian tactics to counter the guards’ authority. They seemed chosen from the hundreds of applicants by BBC ‘central casting’ to be more like what the public imagines convicts look like. One of the most distinguishing features of the prisoner-guard difference is the flamboyant tattoos prominently displayed on some prisoners’ arms – that not coincidentally were the target of many BBC camera close-ups. A central guard figure was a millionaire hi-tech executive who was always aware of how his behaviour would be viewed in the future when the study was shown publicly on the BBC. Accordingly, he enacted the ‘good guard’ role, never being dominant or abusive, even being conciliatory and open to negotiating any and all prisoner demands. Alone with fellow guards, he reminds them of what happened in Nazi Germany when people got too much into their roles. Later on, while trying to defuse tensions, he says to all the participants, ‘There should be two winners, both groups of guards and prisoners, and at the end (of the experiment) we all go to the pub and have a drink together’. He does not want to be guard, proposes a revolution against the experimenters by establishing equality between the two groups. His future orientation mediates against ever getting enmeshed in the immediacy of the present moment. In sum, the alleged random assignment is a very strange case of random

assignment that just happens to have all the big, rough and tough guys with tattoos as prisoners and the more effete guys as guards. I guess sometimes chance favours such an outcome that the BBC producers must have welcomed as did their TV cameramen.

- *Failure to create conditions for a prisoner mentality.* The failure of the researchers even to try to sustain a prison-like psychological atmosphere, despite the million pound BBC-constructed prison setting, is not only surprising to me, but undercuts their specious attempts at meaningful comparisons with the SPE. In addition to calling out participants for their daily confessionals to their so-called 'Diary Room', the researchers themselves are always a dominating presence, figures and not ground in this jail. They make frequent announcements over the prison intercom, conduct daily psychological assessments and, even worse, they impose mindless 'interventions' during the study, clearly for TV values – in opposition to values of psychological science. At the end of the very first day, the research duo does something unimaginable in prisons anywhere, except perhaps one run by The Quakers for the Amish. They announce a competition: a prisoner will be transformed into a guard based on his good behaviour! This tactic was probably generated by BBC staff to stir up the pot that was filled with a very tepid stew at the start of videotaping. Surely it had no legitimate basis in the foundation of research on prison dynamics. This contest interrupts the development of participants becoming socialized into their new roles. Any sense of power differentials and categorical differences between the two groups was instantly muted and muddled. At a number of points throughout, the nature of 'the experiment' is explicit: a guard reminds the prisoners that the experimenters are watching them and had informed them about an incident in this cell; a prisoner reminds a guard that this is an experiment, and another tells a guard that they might be experimenting with you. There are many other failures to create essential testing conditions. Despite the dramatic anonymity-inducing tactic of shaving prisoners' hair, there is no further attempt to create conditions of de-individuation. Although prisoners are given ID numbers, the guards never refer to them by number but by their names. Despite their common uniforms, those prisoners with flashy tattoos were allowed to wear undershirts that revealed them in all their glory for TV close-ups, an individuating tactic.
- *Heisenberg indeterminacy principle.* Sometimes, the very act of measuring and recording a phenomenon changes its nature in unpredictable ways. It seemed evident that most of the participants knew that most of the times, what they said and did was under scrutiny by the experimenters and the TV producers. There are scenes in the privacy of prison cells where prisoners are not talking directly to each other – but into their lapel mikes, for good recordings. Anticipating the national screening of the unfolding events surely changed the behaviour of the chief guard, as noted, and probably for many others as well. Similarly, there are scenes from the solitary confinement chamber where prisoners are openly describing their thoughts and feelings, which of course alter the 'solitary' nature of such punitive confinement.
- *Reality concealing rhetoric.* The authors reveal a penchant for framing wrong-headed decisions in high-sounding rhetoric. So their prisoner-into-guards alchemy competition is legitimized as the 'permeability intervention'. Next they add what they call their 'legitimacy intervention', which means that prisoners are told that there really was not a good basis for having that prisoner become a guard. Sounds more like an 'illegitimacy' intervention, a *post hoc* tactic to explain away the guards' racist decision not to accept into their ranks the better deserving black prisoner. Such an intervention may have also provoked inmate anger at the researchers for lying to them.

Recall that anger was one of the promised advertised reactions to be expected. Let the record also show that these researchers added a new prisoner to replace the guard-transformed one. Who do they select? Not as might be expected if science were relevant in this enterprise, a volunteer from their wait-listed subject pool of those randomly assigned to be prisoners. Instead, they cast into this TV movie someone chosen because he is an 'experienced trade union official'. Why? Simply because, in their terms, he could use his skills 'to envisage the achievement of a more equal set of social relations'. In a second phase of the study, 'after the collapse of the prisoner-guard system', the participants continued as a single self-governing 'commune', interrupted by 'what they (the participants) perceived to be opposition from the experimenters'. These quotes are from the authors who are either unaware of, or not shamed, by such blatant imposition of experimenter bias into the research process. These actions also make evident to me that their underlying personal objective was to hijack this media opportunity to advance their evangelical worldview that rational people with free will can rise above situational forces to live in communal harmony, as long as they can sustain a social identity in accord with prosocial values and norms of their community. It is only when people are powerless and there is a breakdown of groups 'that creates the conditions created under which tyranny can triumph'. In translation, The SPE created those evil conditions, and the BBC-TV experiment created those holy conditions. Against their examples and quotes from historians of the Holocaust, we can readily counter with the current direct parallels between the SPE abuses and those of Iraqi prisoners by both American and British guards at Abu Ghraib and Basra prisons. One independent investigation of these abuses by the Schlesinger Committee makes explicit the relevance of the SPE that should have served as a forewarning to the military.

- *Data Cautions.* The authors get one thing right in noting that given 'the prolonged interaction between participants' in their categorically different groups, the unit of statistical analysis should be the group and not the individual group member. However, all of their data analyses are conducted only at the level of individual analyses. But they do warn wary readers that their 'statistical results need to be read with *some caution*' (emphasis added). You cannot have it both ways, so maybe the wiser caution is for readers to dismiss all their results as not interpretable scientifically.
- *Media versus science values.* There is much merit in presenting scientific research to the general public; I have been doing so for decades with the *Discovering Psychology* video series, as well as my participation with the BBC on programmes like *5 Steps to Tyranny*, or in the recent neo-reality TV programme on British broadcasting, *The Human Zoo*. However, it is quite another matter to confuse scientific research and its values of objectivity and adherence to the canons of scientific method with those values of public media that centre on entertainment and profit. In the case of this particular use of the media to create a scientific study, I find it seriously flawed for the reasons outlined, and many more that space limitations do not allow into this Commentary. My final example focuses on how can observers and psychological scientists ever know what the 'real data' are when those in charge of the media production and ultimately paying all the bills, are able to alter the data represented on their video-recordings?

When there is any major data selection or modification of the originally recorded behaviour, it is critical that we know who was in charge of the selection, what priorities were dominant - those of science or media. What we do know in this BBC experiment is

that following an initial screening for the participants, the prisoners objected to the way they were being portrayed as stupid and less in charge than they were. They insisted that the film be re-edited to satisfy these objections, and it was! One prisoner, still unhappy with the final cut, told a reporter, 'The TV show concentrates on the Big Brother aspect - the funny and sad moments - rather than the science. I think a lot of the more serious side has been cut out because it would make boring TV'.⁴ Another participant voiced a similar complaint about what was shown on national television: 'They said it was meant to be a thorough, scientific programme, but it just looked like a poor man's Big Brother'.⁵ Another insider's perspective on what really happened diverges considerably from that offered by the authors of this BJSP article. He was one of the prisoner ringleaders of the end-game coup, and a visibly dominant prisoner throughout the BBC prison experience. 'The prisoners won because they had organized themselves quicker than the guards; their subversive actions and organizational skills outwitted the guards who were disorganized in their new surroundings. They did not understand that they had to organize themselves and form a set of rules that they all agreed on. The prisoners had a common enemy, the guards, so they had only one target. The guards had many subversive individual groups to contend with. The prisoners escaped at night by force/not stealth. This caused the prisoners and guards to form a commune. I think the group is being exploited by the BBC for commercial gain. Me and my new friends in the group joined the experiment for the furtherance of science and not to be used as a form of cheap entertainment'. (Personal e-mail communication, 26 Feb. 2002; supplemented by in person visit, Glasgow 10 Oct. 2004, with Philip Bimpson).

In conclusion, I hate having to challenge my British colleagues in this manner since ultimately it ends discrediting social psychological research more than the researchers. I have made these and more criticisms known privately to journal editors in Britain and the US where this research has been submitted for multiple publications. Nevertheless, they have succeeded in getting their disputable research published at a time when much more significant and more methodologically sound research is being routinely rejected. I now felt obliged to pick up the gauntlet they have cast down not only against the SPE, but also in creating their artificial sub text of European social identity theory pitted against American role theory. Psychology advances by resolving meaningful conceptual challenges and embracing diverse perspectives. I think that the way this research was conducted and the manner in which it has been portrayed in this published article is not in the service of the best interests of our profession.

Postscript

As a positive postscript to this Commentary, I want to thank these researchers for demonstrating a point that I have long argued in favour of as a means to reduce prisoner abuses, namely greater surveillance of guard-prisoner interactions. This BBC-TV research shows that such violence can be eliminated if all parties in a prison setting realize that their behaviour is open for scrutiny and evaluation.

⁴ Prisoner 922, Ian Burnett quoted in Nikki Murfitt, *Jailed! Evening Standard*, (2 May 2002), p. 30.

⁵ Matt Wells (10 April, 2002). BBC2 delays 'unfair' prison experiment. *The Guardian, National News*, p. 8.