

The Psychology of Imprisonment
by
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Forty years ago at Stanford University in Palo Alto, CA, 24 male students from the U.S. and Canada participated in an experiment that was designed to discover information about the “psychology of imprisonment.” A simulated prison was created in the basement of the Psychology Department building and the men were randomly assigned the roles of prisoners and guards with the toss of a coin. Classroom doors were removed and replaced with bars and numbers. A closet served as “The Hole” and was used for “solitary confinement.” The hallway was “the yard.” An experiment, designed to last for two weeks, only lasted for six days as the “guards” abused their power and the “prisoners” began to behave as if the “prison” was real. Mind games, initiated by the “superintendent,” resulted in undue stress, on both sides, as mental breakdowns warranted the early conclusion of the experiment. Power-tripping “guards” abused the “prisoners” both physically and mentally, using tactics inspired by the Nazis and tactics later seen at Abu Ghraib. The “guards” wore mirrored sunglasses so that their eyes could not be seen and they carried nightsticks. They were given the authority to make up their own rules for maintaining law and order and respect. The “prisoners,” given numbers, had their heads shaved, and wore smocks and no underwear. The punishment and humiliation they endured, increased day-after-day, especially when the “guards” didn’t realize that they were being observed on hidden cameras.

What is it in the human mind that moves those with power over others to increase and abuse that power? What is it in the human mind that sees abuse as normal? What is it in the human mind that sees the abused as less than human? What is it in the human mind that turns a human being into a robot? Some of the “guards” became brutally sadistic, but the ones who didn’t, never intervened to help a “prisoner.” “Prisoners” became depressed or confused, hysterical or violent. Why? Was it all about the circumstances or natural human behavior?

Prisoners Are People Too usually screens documentary films. A documentary film about the Stanford Prison Experiment is: “Quiet Rage.” A 2010 Hollywood film, entitled “The Experiment” (rated R), featuring Forest Whitaker and Adrien Brody, is much like the Stanford Prison Experiment of forty years ago, the men in this film find themselves in a simulated prison environment that spirals out of control.

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