Chapter 5

THE MOCK PRISON EXPERIMENT

One of the most notorious experiments in the history of psychology—because of what it appeared to reveal about human nature and the way in which it was set up—was an attempt to discover exactly how and why being in prison is such a degrading experience. There is clearly a lot wrong with the prison system in Western societies. The rising incidence of prison riots in Britain and America is a sign that something is seriously wrong.

Reforming the system is all very well, but the problems must be correctly identified first. At least three major components of the prison system need to be considered: the guards or warders, the prisoners themselves, and the organizational structure and physical environment of the prison. Are the warders to blame for the current climate of unrest? We know that individuals of a somewhat aggressive or sadistic disposition often choose to become warders. The second possibility is that prisoners, being naturally subversive and anti-social, tend to create an unsavoury atmosphere whatever their environment. The third possibility is that it is the prison itself, the building, cell conditions, lack of privacy and rigid power structure, which is mainly responsible.

A plausible case can be made for any or all of these factors causing trouble, yet it is extremely difficult to prove. What can psychologists contribute towards an understanding of the malfunctions in the prison system? It was Philip Zimbardo of Stanford University who came up with an ingenious experiment designed to explore these failings. Many critics have accused him and his colleagues of overstepping the mark in their pursuit of scientific knowledge, but until the experiment began they could not have predicted what would happen. The Zimbardo experiment is one of the most famous, some would say infamous, in the annals of psychology.

KEY EXPERIMENT: THE MOCK PRISON STUDY

Philip Zimbardo and his co-workers at Stanford University, Craig Haney, Curt Banks and David Jaffe, were interested in determining the causes of the dehumanization that is so prevalent in prisons. Suppose that ordinary members of society were persuaded to act as guards and prisoners in a mock prison which mimicked the environment and day-to-day running of a real prison? If the mock prison failed to produce the hostility and alienation of a real prison, this would surely suggest that the personality characteristics of the guards or the prisoners, or both, are the vital ingredients in the unpleasantness found in a real prison. On the other hand, if the behaviour observed in the mock prison was very similar to that in a real prison, this would suggest that it is the environment of a prison which is the crucial factor in producing unpleasantness.

The experiment started on 14 August 1971 in Palo Alto, California. The quiet of a Sunday morning was shattered by a screeching squad car siren as police swept through the city picking up the participating college students from their homes in a surprise 'mass arrest'. All of the 'suspects' were charged with a felony, informed of their constitutional rights, spread-eagled against the police car, searched, handcuffed, and taken away in the back seat of the police car to the police station. The whole operation was carried out so realistically, thanks to the co-operation of the Palo Alto City Police Department, that the alarmed mother of one 18-year-old student arrested for armed robbery said: 'I felt my son must have done something.'

On arrival at the police station, each suspect was fingerprinted and identification forms were prepared for his 'jacket' or central information file. He was then left on his own in a detention cell. Later in the day, each suspect was blindfolded and taken to the 'Stanford County Prison', where he was stripped naked, skinned-searched, deloused and issued with a uniform, bedding and basic supplies. The uniform worn by the prisoners consisted of a loose-fitting smock with an identity number on the front and back, no underclothes, a light chain and lock around one ankle, rubber sandals, and a cap made from a nylon stocking.

The prison warden gathered the prisoners together, and told them about the 16 basic rules of prisoner conduct, starting with 'Prisoners must address the guards as "Mr Correctional Officer"' and ending with 'Failure to obey any of the above rules may result in punishment'.

The 'guards' had been told beforehand that their task was to 'maintain the reasonable degree of order within the prison necessary for its effective functioning'. They were given only minimal guidance about the way they were expected to behave, except that they were specifically prohibited from using physical aggression. They were
clearly distinguishable from the prisoners by their uniform, which consisted of a plain khaki shirt and trousers, a whistle, a police nightstick and reflecting sunglasses.

The guards and prisoners were selected from among a total of 75 respondents to a newspaper advertisement asking for male volunteers to participate in a psychological study of 'prison life' for 15 dollars a day over a period of two weeks. The 10 prisoners and 11 guards who actually took part in the experiment were among those respondents judged to be the most stable (physically and mentally), the most mature, and the least inclined towards anti-social behaviour. In fact the majority of them were middle-class students.

The prisoners and guards were to live within the confines of the 'Stanford County Prison', which was situated in the basement of the psychology building at Stanford University. This mock prison was deliberately designed to be as unpleasant as possible. There were three small cells (9 ft by 6 ft), with three prisoners assigned to each. As in a real prison, the windows were barred, and in addition to guards there was a warden, a superintendent (Zimbardo), a parole board and a grievance committee. All the participants had agreed to take part in spite of having been told that those assigned to play the prisoner role could expect to be under surveillance, might be harassed, and might have some of their basic rights curtailed during imprisonment.

The happenings within the mock prison were so unpleasant and potentially so dangerous that the entire experiment had to be brought to an end after six days rather than the scheduled fourteen. Violence and rebellion broke out within less than two days of the start of the experiment. The prisoners ripped off their clothing and their identity numbers, shouted and cursed at the guards, and barricaded themselves inside the cells. The guards put down the rebellion violently using fire extinguishers, transformed the prisoners' rights into 'privileges', played the prisoners off against one another and systematically harassed them. One of the prisoners showed such severe symptoms of emotional disturbance (disorganized thinking, uncontrollable crying and screaming) after only one day that he had to be released.

On the third day a rumour spread through the 'prison' about a mass escape plot. This led the superintendent and the guards to take various repressive and preventative steps. On the fourth day, two more prisoners displayed symptoms of severe emotional disturbance and were released; a third developed a psychosomatic rash all over his body and was also released. As time passed, some of the guards seemed to derive great satisfaction from exercising power and behaving in a sadistic manner. A particularly interesting observation was that the use of force, harassment and aggression by the guards increased steadily from day to day, in spite of the fact that prisoner resistance declined and evaporated. The guards also manifested more indirect displays of power as time went by, such as
rapping their sticks against their hands or against the furniture, walking with a swagger, or adopting extravagant postures. The prisoners, on the other hand, began to slouch and keep their eyes fixed on the ground.

What seems to have led to the experiment being abandoned was a comment made by Christina Maslach, Zimbardo’s fiancée. She had gone to the prison to help interview the prisoners. While she was there she saw a line of blindfolded prisoners shuffling along under guard to the toilet. Miss Maslach burst into tears and exclaimed: ‘It’s awful what you’re doing to those boys!’ Naturally, Philip Zimbardo’s heart melted at these words and the experiment was officially halted the next morning.

Perhaps the most vivid accounts of what it was like to take part in such a dehumanizing experience were the diary entries of those directly involved. Before the experiment one of the guards wrote in his diary that he was a pacifist and so unaggressive that he could not imagine maltreating any other living being. By the third day he appeared to be thoroughly enjoying the power to manipulate people. Before the prisoners received visitors, he warned them not to complain unless they wanted the visit to come to an abrupt end. What he really liked, he said, was having almost total control over everything that was said and done.

On the fifth day, problems arose because a new prisoner refused to eat his sausage. The guard’s diary entry at this point reads: ‘We throw him into the Hole ordering him to hold sausages in each hand . . . We decide to play upon prisoner solidarity and tell the new one that all the others will be deprived of visitors if he does not eat his dinner . . . I walk by and slam my stick into the Hole door . . . I am very angry at this prisoner for causing discomfort and trouble for the others. I decided to force-feed him, but he wouldn’t eat. I let the food slide down his face . . . I hated myself for making him eat but I hated him more for not eating.’

As we have already noted, the guards became increasingly brutal and aggressive during the course of the experiment and ignored the warning not to use physical force. However, Zimbardo and his colleagues reported that there were differences in behaviour among the guards, and only about a third of the guards, they felt, were so consistently hostile and degrading as to be described as sadistic.

On the other hand, the prisoners became progressively more passive as the days passed, and sank into a state of depression and helplessness. Perhaps the reason for this was that they began to realize there was very little they could do to improve matters or control the environment. As the old saying goes: ‘Why bang your head against a brick wall?’

Despite its premature end Zimbardo’s experiment showed that brutal, ugly prison situations can develop even when upright citizens play the parts of prisoners and guards. The dehumanization which occurred in the Stanford experiment could hardly be attributed to the ‘deviant personalities’ of those involved. The most natural explanation was that it was the prison environment which was mainly responsible for the participants’ behaviour. In Zimbardo’s own words, his study revealed ‘the power of social, institutional forces to make good men engage in evil deeds’.

But how similar was the mock prison to a real prison? The evidence from those with first-hand experience of real prisons is somewhat mixed. Prisoners in the maximum security wing of Rhode Island Penitentiary said that they recognized the reactions of the mock prisoners as corresponding to the confused and over-emotional reactions of many first offenders. A remark by one ex-convict throws some light on the passivity of the mock prisoners: ‘The only way to really make it with the bosses [in Texas prisons] is to withdraw into yourself, both mentally and physically—literally making yourself as small as possible. It’s another way they dehumanize you. They want you to make no waves in prison.’

A woman prisoner stares out of her cell window. To survive prison conditions, she will probably withdraw into herself; this will further undermine her sense of identity.
WHAT THE CRITICS SAID
The associate warden at San Quentin prison was predictably sceptical about Zimbardo's experiment when he was interviewed on television. Asked whether it was relevant to the prison system, he replied that it was worthless, biased and methodologically unsound, but he was basing his judgment on a brief news article he had read. Subsequently, Zimbardo's right to visit any of California's prisons was refused by the Superintendent of the Department of Corrections. This action suggests, at least to the cynical mind, that officiandom was frightened because Zimbardo had got it right.

The most weighty attack came from Boston psychologists Ali Banuazizi and Siamak Mohavedi, who argued that the participants in the Stanford Prison Experiment were not in a social situation that was functionally equivalent to that of a real prison; all they were asked to do was to play the roles of prisoners and guards, and since they had strong stereotypes of how guards and prisoners behave in a real prison, they simply engaged in conscious role-playing based on these stereotypes. In this connection, it is interesting to note that most of the guards, when questioned about their aggressive behaviour, argued that they had 'just played the role' of a tough guard.

Banuazizi and Mohavedi examined some of these ideas by asking people to fill in a questionnaire giving a description of the Stanford Prison Experiment followed by a series of questions. Eighty-one per cent of those questioned guessed fairly accurately what the experimenter was trying to prove; one respondent, for example, wrote: 'He believes that people are pushed about, put down, and humiliated in gaols.'

The vast majority of respondents (90 per cent) predicted that the mock guards would be oppressive, hostile and aggressive. Such a wide consensus suggests that there is a familiar stereotype concerning the behaviour of prison guards and warders. There was less agreement about the probable reactions of the mock prisoners. Approximately 30 per cent thought the prisoners would be rebellious and defiant, another 30 per cent guessed they would be passive and docile, and most of the others thought they would probably fluctuate between the two.

So, as these data indicate, the mock guards may simply have been pretending to conform to the cultural stereotype of the aggressive, unpleasant prison guard, and did not 'really' get involved in the part they were playing. However, it is less clear whether the mock prisoners' behaviour can be so readily accounted for by the stereotype argument. There are no cultural expectations concerning the typical behaviour of prisoners.

It is certainly true that the behaviour patterns exhibited by those engaged in role-playing reflect many different things, including what the role-player would like to do, what he feels is socially desirable, and what he thinks the experimenter expects him to do. In this connection, Banuazizi and Mohavedi were correct when they criticized Zimbardo for assuming that his results could be explained fairly simply. But their own explanation of Zimbardo's results was not totally adequate either. Was the passivity, depression, helplessness and even psychological dysfunction displayed by the prisoners merely a remarkable piece of acting designed to please the experimenters? Even if severe emotional disturbance can be simulated, psychosomatic rashes presumably cannot.

The strongest evidence against the idea that Zimbardo's subjects were merely 'acting out' culturally defined roles is that extreme versions of these roles were observed mainly towards the end of the experiment. If Banuazizi and Mohavedi were correct, why was full-blown stereotypical behaviour not manifest from the beginning? Furthermore, the physical abuse and harassment shown by the guards seem to have gone quite a long way beyond what would have been expected from mere play-acting. While acting is most likely in the presence of an audience, Zimbardo actually found that harassment of prisoners was greater when individual guards were alone with solitary prisoners or out of range of the recording equipment.

A close examination of the data collected by Zimbardo suggests that there was undoubtedly some play-acting during the early stages of the study, with stereotyped expectations helping to determine the participants' behaviour. However, it is worth noting that real prison guards or warders during the early days of their employment are also likely to 'role-play'. As the experiment progressed, the participants seem to have become increasingly involved in the roles assigned to them, noticeably less self-conscious.

The aspect of the Stanford Prison Experiment which worried people most was whether it was morally acceptable to expose the participants to such degradation and hostility. Can one really justify a study in which four participants had to be released because of 'extreme depression, disorganized thinking, uncontrollable crying and fits of rage'? Was it reasonable for Zimbardo to stand by while the guards forced the prisoners to clean toilets with their bare hands, hosed them with fire extinguishers, and made them do push-ups, sometimes with a guard standing on their back?

Professor Harris Savin of the University of Pennsylvania, for instance, described the mock prison as a 'hell', and compared Zimbardo to used-car salesmen and others 'whose roles tempt them to be as obnoxious as the law allows'. He concluded as follows: 'Professors who, in pursuit of their own academic interests and professional advancement, deceive, humiliate, and otherwise mistreat their students are subverting the atmosphere of mutual trust and intellectual honesty without which, as we are fond of telling outsiders who want to meddle in our affairs, neither education nor free inquiry can flourish.'
ZIMBARDO'S DEFENCE
In reply, Zimbardo argued that psychological research is morally justified if the gains—new knowledge, for instance—outweigh the losses. He claimed that the 'losses' suffered by the participants did not persist after the end of the study. This was ascertained by means of questionnaires sent to the participants several weeks after the study, several months later, and then at yearly intervals. An attempt was made to minimize the negative effects of the study by holding day-long debriefing sessions, in which the moral conflicts posed by the study were made explicit.

Zimbardo admitted that there was a lot of suffering during the course of the experiment, but pointed out that all of the participants signed a formal 'informed consent' statement which specified that there would be an invasion of privacy, loss of some civil rights and harassment. He also pointed out that any professional psychologists who felt unhappy about the study could have lodged a complaint with the American Psychological Association Ethics Committee. In fact, only one inquiry was addressed to the Committee within two years of the study taking place, and that was from Zimbardo himself!

On the positive side, most of the participants reported that they had learned valuable things about themselves. Some of the participants volunteered to give up part of their summer holiday to work in local prisons, and most became advocates of penal reform. Another possible benefit of the study was the influence which it had on the public at large. For example, one citizens' group used the results of the study in a legal action to prevent the construction of a huge new prison in Contra Costa County, California, in favour of smaller, community-based facilities.

The moral position adopted by Zimbardo is one in which ends justify means, and in which research is evaluated by considering the benefits and costs involved. This accords with the view of most psychologists and was expressed in the following words by the American Psychological Association Committee on Ethical Standards in Psychological Research: 'The general ethical question always is whether there is a negative effect upon the dignity and welfare of the participants that the importance of the research does not warrant.' Even so there are difficulties.

First, it is all very well to justify research on the basis of likely benefits and costs, but we do not always know what the consequences are going to be until after the experiment has been carried out. Zimbardo claims that the high costs of his prison experiment, in terms of degradation and physical assault, surprised him. Nevertheless an earlier and smaller version of the main experiment had been carried out under Zimbardo's supervision at Stanford University, with many of the same disquieting results.

Second, one person's assessment of the bene-

Two approaches to prison organization: the bars and barriers of a closed prison, and the social and family contact allowed by an open prison. The one operates a system of punishment, the other a system of rewards.

fits and costs of a piece of research may not agree with someone else's. Many people would disagree with Zimbardo, arguing that the suffering of the participants was not justified by the kind or quality of information gained.

Immanuel Kant and others have argued that ends cannot justify means. There should be no exceptions to a moral principle, regardless of the consequences. But the rigid following of such principles can have extremely unfortunate consequences. If a madman with a gun asks you where your mother is because he wants to shoot her, would you tell him, for the sake of sticking to the principle 'Always tell the truth?' The inflexible and unrealistic nature of such a moral position has limited appeal.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRISON REFORM
In spite of the criticisms, the Stanford Prison Experiment produced thought-provoking and striking results. What is it about the organizational structure of prisons that produces such unfortunate effects
on the morale and behaviour of inmates? Zimbardo argued that one relevant factor is that prisons are designed to maximize anonymity. All prisoners are put into standard uniforms, required to have hair of a standard length, and are fed standard meals on standard plates at standard times. Of course their personal identity is under siege.

However, it was the power structure within prisons which Zimbardo identified as being the most important factor: 'Power is the most important variable in social psychology and the most neglected... The great discovery of American behaviourism, namely that responses that are reinforced will increase in frequency, is but a technological footnote to the primary issue of who controls the reinforcers.'

Within the prison system the guards or warders exert the power. They expect prisoners to obey all the rules, but they don’t reward them for their obedience. But if prisoners disobey the rules, that is noticed and followed by punishment. So the best a prisoner can hope for is that the guards will behave predictably so that he knows how to behave in order to avoid punishment. When actual prisoners are asked ‘What are the characteristics of a good guard?’, most say they prefer guards who ‘go by the book’ and don’t make exceptions.

The fact that prisoners are relatively unable to control their environment or obtain rewards by acting in certain ways may be of crucial importance. Laboratory research has demonstrated that such circumstances produce an apathetic state known as ‘learned helplessness’, which seems to have much in common with the passivity and unresponsiveness of Zimbardo’s mock prisoners. Perhaps prisoners would be more contented with their lot if they were praised and rewarded for following the prison rules rather than punished for disobeying them. Such an approach has been adopted with some success in the ‘token economies’ discussed in Chapter 24.

CONCLUSIONS

Philip Zimbardo set up a mock prison to investigate the failings of the prison system. He found that responsible citizens, when asked to play the part of prison guards, acted in a dehumanizing way towards other responsible citizens playing the part of prisoners. This suggested that it is the environment and power structure of prisons rather than the sadistic nature of the guards or the antisocial nature of the prisoners which lead to the horrors of prison. More specifically, prison power structures require the guards to punish the prisoners for violating the rules, and the prisoners are not allowed to control their environment to any significant extent. However, Zimbardo’s work did not actually disprove alternative explanations, and there is evidence that criminals do differ in personality from the normal population (as we shall see in Chapter 24).

As well as providing new information about the prison system, the Stanford Prison Experiment raised important ethical issues. According to Zimbardo, research should be judged by the criterion of whether the benefits exceed the costs. In a study in which the costs included several days of utter misery and humiliation for some of the participants, the benefits would need to be very substantial indeed. Many people feel that Zimbardo’s study was a clear case of the costs greatly exceeding the claimed benefits, and that the study should not have been carried out or should have been halted sooner.