“It’s Still a Prison to Me”: A New Dramatic Film Portrayal of the Stanford Prison Experiment

A Review of
The Stanford Prison Experiment (2015)
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The . . . study had to be prematurely terminated when it became apparent that many of the ‘prisoners’ were in serious distress and many of the ‘guards’ were behaving in ways which brutalized and degraded their fellow subjects . . . the emerging reality of this role-playing situation was sufficiently compelling to influence . . . research staff, faculty observers, a priest, lawyer, ex-convict, and relatives and friends of the subjects who visited the prison on several occasions . . .

—Zimbardo (1973, p. 243)

One big question surrounds the new feature film The Stanford Prison Experiment: Is it really needed now? After all, social psychologist Philip Zimbardo and his graduate students filmed and took still shots of the original participants in action. Indeed, as an undergraduate psychology major I paid rapt attention to a sound-supported slideshow of student “prisoners” and student “guards” adopting and then all too easily filling their respective roles. A while later, the slideshow seemed dated (do slide projectors still exist?), so a film version was released for classroom use. And all while Zimbardo spoke and wrote extensively about the implications of the research, persuasively linking it to the all-too-frequent real-life examples of arbitrary mayhem and the occasional atrocity. He later wrote the well-received book The Lucifer Effect (Zimbardo, 2008), which recounts the study and the Stanford prison-esque events that unfolded in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq after Saddam Hussein’s fall (see also, Fiske, Harris, & Cuddy, 2004). Countless introductory psychology and social psychology textbooks made—and still make—much about the faux prison experience that ended only 6 days, rather than the scheduled 2 weeks, after it began.

So, do we need a new film portraying the prison experiment? As a psychologist and educator, I think the answer is a resounding “yes”—a new account of the events that took place on Stanford’s idyllic campus over 44 years ago is sorely needed. The reasons are simple: First, today’s students have no connection to the original work or any sense of the era (the early 70s) when the study was done. Second, this generation of students needs to
be entertained more than past cohorts; thus, a compelling movie will enliven key behavioral principles much more than any documentary, no matter how well-crafted it might be (I say this with both experience as a teacher and a heavy heart for the loss of students’ attention spans). Third, many people who have not taken a high school or college-level psychology course know little or nothing about the prison study or its relevance to their lives or those of the beleaguered people they see in newspapers, on television, or, more likely, via the Internet (today, ill-treated refugees from conflicts in the Middle East, tomorrow, who knows?). We do live in an age where entertainment drives the public’s interest and a new, well-done, and well-acted film may be one way for the behavioral and psychological lessons regarding the power of situations over people to be recognized as well as remembered.

The Power of the Situation

Classic research in social psychology—Asch’s (1955) conformity experiments, Milgram’s (1963) obedience to authority studies, and Zimbardo’s (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973; Zimbardo, Haney, Banks, & Jaffe, 1973) prison experiment—highlights Kurt Lewin’s view that situational influences (e.g., social pressure, norms, roles) often override people’s personalities, character, and expectations for how they should or will act (e.g., Nisbett, 1980; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). In the case of the prison experiment, we know that a typical, if screened, group of college-aged men were offered modest remuneration for the 2 weeks they were to take part in a role-playing exercise. Half were assigned at random to be prisoners (who ended up wearing hospital gowns, ankle chains, and little else) and the rest became guards (who sported batons, mirrored sunglasses, and crisp khaki uniforms). Zimbardo and his staff surreptitiously observed how the young men took to their new roles and symbolic transformation without any script other than what their imaginations and memories could conjure up about “prison life.”

If you are familiar with the experiment, you know that arbitrary prisoner counts initiated by the guards in the “yard” (the hallway facing the small “cells” or storage rooms where the prisoners slept on cots) soon led to small rebellions on the part of the prisoners, and then retaliation and, later, creative humiliation meted out by the guards. The young prisoners soon became their assigned numbers (“My name is Prisoner 819!”) as their first and surnames were neglected while many (though not all) of the guards acted with clever cruelty, and the experiment devolved ineffably into something akin to the plot of Lord of the Flies (Golding, 1954), illustrating the consequences of subjective power exercised by some over others. Fortunately, Zimbardo put an end to the study much earlier than planned, staged a rapprochement between the prisoners and guards some time later, and then followed up on the health and psychological well-being of the participants thereafter.

This general summary captures what happened in real time in the experiment and the earlier slide and film versions, as well as the new motion picture. The power of the situation is nicely demonstrated in the new dramatization precisely because the writer, director, and the actors themselves adhered to more or less what happened in that basement prison.

The Power of the New Film

Admittedly, the film is part period piece: The actors wear bellbottoms, their hair is longish and occasionally a bit greasy, they often sport beards or handlebar mustaches, and smoking
Meaning and the Stanford Prison Experiment

I had the pleasure of attending a pedagogy conference at Stanford a few summers back. During a break, some friends and I wandered over to venerable Jordan Hall and ventured into the basement hallway to see where Zimbardo and his staff staged the prison study. The space is impressive only in the sense that so much was achieved with so little, and a small but elegant plaque now informs passersby that the Stanford Prison study was indeed conducted here. The set in the new film looks remarkably like the real space, further confirming that the film’s writer and director wanted to adhere to actual events rather than adding dramatic elements to make things more palatable to today’s restive audiences.

I think these were wise choices, as the story line—the power of the situation and the roles people quickly inhabit—provides the drama. As viewers, we see how arbitrary power and reactions to it causes things to spin out of control and we empathize a bit with the Zimbardo character (played by Billy Crudup), as he, like the prisoners and guards, is drawn into his “warden” role, worrying more about holding the staged prison together and less about the validity of any findings or, worse still, the fate of the young men who end up filling their roles all too well. We appreciate when the actress Olivia Thirlby, playing Christina Maslach, Zimbardo’s former student, now girlfriend and colleague (and future spouse), issues concerns and eventually honest outrage at what is happening to the young research participants. We feel that way too, but at the same time we, like the guards, prisoners, and Zimbardo himself, are curious about what will happen next and how far things will go.
References


