

# Breaking free from Stanford

We all know the story of the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE). It has been a staple of introductory psychology textbooks and lectures for nearly 50 years (see Griggs, 2014). Ordinary young men were randomly divided into Prisoners and Guards; within a short time, the Guards become so brutal and the Prisoners so victimised that the study – originally scheduled for two weeks – had to be halted after only five days.

These findings seem to demonstrate the terrifying power of the situation over individuals. Philip Zimbardo has always insisted that he had to do nothing to produce such toxicity. The participants simply slipped ‘naturally’ – and perhaps unconsciously – into their roles as vicious Guards or broken Prisoners. But now, a half century later, dramatic new evidence has emerged that challenges Zimbardo’s account. Our textbooks and our lectures will have to be rewritten. The story of what happened in the SPE and why such brutality occurred will have to be retold.

Over the years, several scholars had expressed doubt over Zimbardo’s version. But the problem was that much of what actually happened in the SPE remained opaque and so the story in the textbooks went unchanged. We knew that the study had been recorded but the recordings were not in the public domain. And since evidence from the SPE was never actually published in a peer-reviewed psychology journal, methodological details of the study were also not in the scientific domain.

This all changed recently when both video and audio tapes were deposited in Zimbardo’s online archive at Stanford University ([tinyurl.com/ybf5amaa](http://tinyurl.com/ybf5amaa)). It includes 994 items of which 49 are videos and 54 are sound recordings. Together, these materials show that the textbook account is even more misleading than we imagined.

The startling new evidence tells a tale of the experimenters treating the Guards effectively as research assistants. It reveals how disturbed the Prisoners were when Zimbardo told them they could not leave the study. It raises profound intellectual, moral and even legal questions about what went on in that Stanford basement in the summer of 1971.

Many have reacted to this evidence by rejecting the SPE entirely. Thus, the most thorough analysis of the archive, by French author Thibault Le Texier is labelled *Histoire d’un Mensonge* – which translates to ‘Story of a Lie’. Our reaction is different. While it is undeniable that Zimbardo’s previous accounts of the SPE have been highly selective, the new evidence provides the opportunity to cast new light on just why some of the Guards turned so brutal.

We have had the same burning question since we tried to replicate aspects of the SPE in the BBC Prison Experiment some 20 years ago (see [www.bbcprisonstudy.org](http://www.bbcprisonstudy.org)) and found that, in the absence of leadership from us, participants were generally reluctant to adopt their



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assigned roles. There are clearly many reasons why a research finding might fail to replicate. But we had always suspected that Zimbardo’s unusually interventionist leadership role in the SPE was central to understanding the results of his study. The newly available materials prove extremely helpful in addressing this issue.

Many of the tapes are relevant, but one stands out: a recorded meeting between Zimbardo’s Warden, David Jaffe, and a ‘reluctant’ Guard, John Mark.

You can listen to this interview via [tinyurl.com/SPEtape](http://tinyurl.com/SPEtape) – start at 8.38 minutes – or read the transcript of the interview we have created (<https://psyarxiv.com/b7crx>). The tape shows conclusively that the experimenters did not leave the participants to their own devices, but intervened to try and shape their behaviour. More specifically, it provides evidence of identity leadership. That is, Zimbardo and his colleagues sought to ensure conformity amongst the Guards by making brutality appear necessary for the achievement of worthy ingroup goals, namely science that would make the case for prison reform. ‘What we want to do’, Zimbardo’s Warden told the Guard, ‘is be able to go to the world with what we’ve done and say “Now look, this is what happens when you have Guards who behave this way”... But in order to say that we have to have Guards who behave that way.’

But you do not need to take our word for it – just listen

to the tape and decide for yourself whether this supports Zimbardo's argument that Guards slipped naturally into role, or whether it supports our argument that leadership was necessary to turn the Guards into brutes.

After hearing the tape, you may never think about the SPE in the same way again. We suspect that you will also agree how important it is for the Zimbardo and his research team to acknowledge their role as the leaders of the toxic social system that developed in the basement of the Stanford psychology department. We recently submitted our analysis of the Jaffe–Mark meeting for publication in an academic journal (Haslam et al., 2018) to see if peer reviewers agree with our identity leadership analysis of the SPE.

The tape joins other evidence which indicates that the experimenters intervened to shape the study more than they acknowledged. For instance, there was video evidence of Zimbardo addressing his Guards before the study started. Then there were letters, magazine articles, interviews with past participants and Zimbardo's associates (notably his 'consultant' Carlo Prescott) which made stronger claims about intervention. But they were little more than snippets, hearsay, rumour. Until now, these seemed of inadequate weight to overturn one of the 'monuments' of our discipline. Zimbardo could easily dismiss them. But the new evidence from the archives will finally allow readers to listen to the evidence themselves, rather than rely on the experimenters' own story.

How has Zimbardo responded this time? He has posted a lengthy answer to his critics on his Stanford Prison Experiment website, has been interviewed by science journalist Brian Resnick for the online Vox magazine, and recently send an email to the Society for Personality and Social Psychology professional listserv. Here he makes a range points which are focused on other issues, such as the authenticity of the participants, his volume of publications, and issues that are unrelated to identity leadership. Nonetheless, his key conclusion is that 'none of these criticisms present any substantial evidence that alters the SPE's main conclusion'.

In the case of the Jaffe–Mark meeting, Zimbardo tells Resnick: *'Jaffe picks on this guy because he is doing nothing. He's sitting on the sideline, doing nothing, watching. He's gotta earn his keep as a Guard. The point is telling a Guard to be tough does not mean telling a Guard to be mean, to be cruel, to be sadistic, which many of the Guards became of their own volition playing the role of what they thought was a prison Guard.'*

The phrase 'He's gotta earn his keep as a Guard' (and that earning one's keep means being tough) represents a dramatic change to the story, even as Zimbardo denies that anything needs to change. It is a recognition that participants did not simply slip into role but were required to do so by the experimenters. In short, Zimbardo describes the Guard as one would describe a paid research confederate rather than a volunteer participant

whose behaviour we are observing to learn something about human nature.

Moreover, the fact that some Guards in Zimbardo's experiment proved creative in playing their role, provides more evidence for the importance of leadership and authority in motivating such creativity. Indeed, it is a well-worn technique of leaders to set a general goal such that followers have to go the extra mile to gain approval. Indeed, this is a process that the historian of Nazism, Ian Kershaw, referred to as 'working towards the Führer'. Here, then, it appears that the brutality of the guards was a matter of 'working towards the experimenter' (Reicher et al., 2012).

Zimbardo concludes his interview with Resnick by characterising his critics as: *'a bunch of bloggers saying, "We're gonna shoot it [the SPE] down"'. We cannot speak for every critic, but in our case he is entirely wrong. We don't want to take the SPE down. Quite the contrary. We want to re-invigorate the investigation into why Zimbardo's Guards turned brutal. We fully agree with him about the necessity of understanding why this happened in his study, and why it happens in the world at large. It is for this reason that we are trying to determine exactly what features of the situation influenced participants' actions and, more broadly, the way that authorities and leaders are implicated in turning people toxic.*

It is disappointing that Zimbardo (thus far) has tried to dismiss this debate. He dismisses his critics as peddlers of fake news rather than scientists who share his goal of understanding the darkest reaches of human nature. Dismissal might have worked in the past, but now the necessary evidence is available to anyone who wishes to spend a few minutes listening to it. There is no longer any excuse for repeating a story which is so deeply flawed. We need to get busy rewriting our texts and revising our lectures.

**Stephen Reicher**  
University of St Andrews  
**S. Alexander Haslam**  
University of Queensland  
**Jay J. Van Bavel**  
New York University

#### Key sources

Find links, including Zimbardo's interviews and response, via [www.thepsychologist.org.uk/time-change-story](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk/time-change-story)

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