

Rethinking the psychology of tyranny: The BBC prison study

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Reicher & Haslam (2006)

Introduction / Background

The arbitrary and/or oppressive exercise of power is called tyranny and the question as to why people condone the tyranny of others and/or act tyrannically themselves is a research topic in social psychology. Previous explanations suggest that group psychology always moves in the direction of extreme anti-social behaviour and proposes that when in a group, individuals lose their self-identity (deindividuation), and are capable of barbaric acts. In a famous study, Haney, Banks & Zimbardo built a mock prison in a university basement and recruited 21 healthy and well-adjusted students as volunteers who were then randomly allocated to the role of prisoner or guard. Zimbardo reported that interpersonal relationships deteriorated, becoming dehumanising. The guards became increasingly aggressive and the most hostile guards became role models for the other guards. The Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) was terminated on 6th day because the prisoners could not cope and the behaviour of the guards became even more tyrannical. Zimbardo concluded: that the illusion of 'power' had become real, that both prisoners and guards identified with, and conformed to, their allocated social role and that the situation people are in, rather than individual characteristics, determines behaviour. However, the guards in the SPE were given clear guidance on how to cause powerlessness in prisoners. Also, because of ethical concerns the SPE has never been replicated.

The aim of this study was to create an institution 'like' a prison in which to investigate the behaviour of groups that are unequal in resources, power and status, and the conditions under which people do or do not assume (conform to) allocated social roles.

Reicher & Haslam wanted to answer the following questions: (i) do participants accept roles uncritically? (ii) do those given power exercise it with no restraint? (iii) do those given no power accept their situation without complaint?

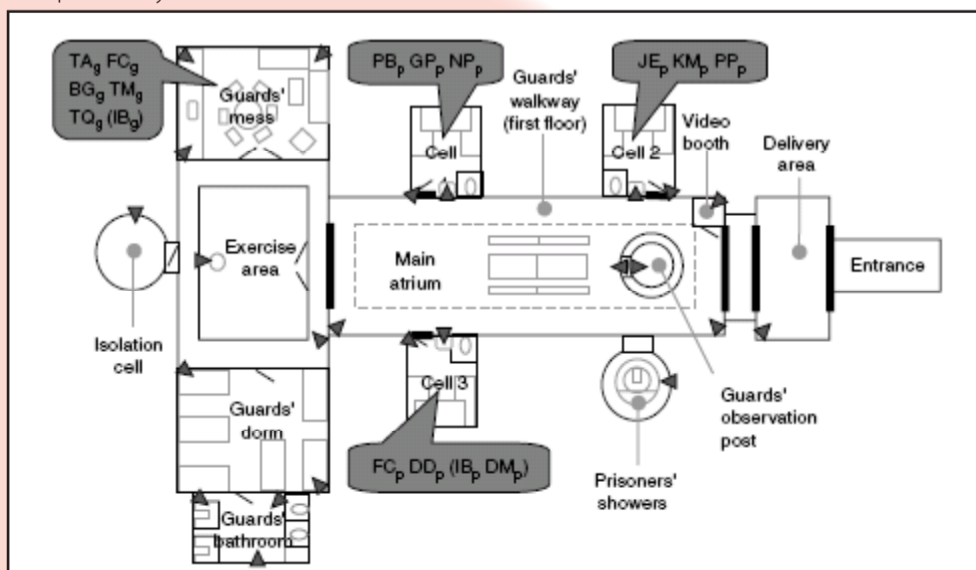
Method

An experimental case study

Ethics: Every effort was made to ensure this study was ethical. Prior to the study commencing, the study design was submitted for scrutiny by the BPS ethics committee. All participants underwent clinical, medical & background screening and all gave fully informed consent. Clinical psychologists monitored participants throughout the study. There was a paramedic on duty throughout and security guards were present to intervene if needed. The study was also monitored by a five person ethics committee who were able to terminate the study at any time.

Participants were recruited by adverts in national press, were screened as well adjusted and pro-social, were fully assessed over a weekend, provided medical and character references and during this screening process 332 male applicants were reduced to 27. From this 27, 15 men were chosen to represent diversity in age, class and ethnicity. These were matched on personality variables into 5 groups of 3 and one from each group was randomly allocated as guard and other two as prisoners – thus there were 5 guards and 10 prisoners.

The prison layout



Procedure

The guard initiation: the evening prior to study the guards were told they had been selected. They were shown prison timetables, informed about their duties, roll calls and their responsibility to 'ensure institution runs smoothly'. They were asked to draw up the rules and to suggest punishments, TOLD NO PHYSICAL VIOLENCE WAS ALLOWED and taken to the prison. Guards had superior accommodation, good quality uniform, superior meals, keys to all doors & punishment cell, access to the guard station with a surveillance system which could view all cells and resources such as sweets to give as rewards.

Prisoner situation: Prisoners arrived one at a time. They had 3 man cells, their hair was shaved on arrival, their uniform was a T shirt having a 3 digit number, loose trousers and sandals, they too were told that NO VIOLENCE was allowed, and a list of the rules and 'prisoner rights' was posted on each cell wall.

Three variables were manipulated: (i) The permeability of roles. Although guards were told that they had been selected on various criteria, participants were told the tests were not always reliable thus that prisoners could be promoted to guards on day 3. Thus at the outset all believed it possible to change roles. (ii) Legitimacy of roles: On day 3 prisoners would be told that there were really no differences between prisoners & guards, but that it was impractical to reassign roles thus causing the perception that group differences were not legitimate (this variable was not introduced). (iii) Cognitive alternatives: On the 4th day, a new prisoner, chosen because of his background as a Trade Union official, was introduced to provide the skills required to organise 'collective action'

Results

- The guards did not develop group identity / coherence, they could not agree norms / priorities and did not internalise the power role.
- Until day 3, when 1 prisoner was promoted to guard, individual self-interest predominated in prisoners as each prisoner tried to show the qualities that might lead to promotion.
- After day 3, when roles were fixed (impermeable) the prisoners did develop group identity and as a group challenged the guards, this led to a shift in power and a collapse of the prisoner / guard system.
- On day 6 prisoners broke out of cells and the regime of the guards was ended. All decided to continue as a self-governing 'commune' but the prisoners who had led the challenges did not co-operate.
- By day 8 a more authoritarian system of inequality was being proposed by some. The study ended on day 8.

Conclusions

- The way in which members of a group behave may be pro or anti social, and depends on the norms and values of the group social identity.
- Failing groups create problems for their own members, and for others, because when people cannot create a social system they will accept extreme solutions proposed by others.
- It is the breakdown of groups, and powerlessness, that create the conditions for tyranny.
- It is possible to design and run powerful social psychological research studies that are also ethical.