12 prisoners and 12 guards. The prison environment was tough, with only basic sleeping mattresses and plain food being supplied. Guards were carefully screened and underwent a long and extensive training process. Zimbardo divided the guards into regular working shifts and patterns, which helped to ensure discipline and control. Prisoners and guards were screened for non-social tendencies in his experiment.

Surprisingly, his fellow inmates viewed him as a troublemaker rather than a fellow victim trying to make a change. Guards were expected to enforce the rules strictly, which sometimes led to the use of excessive force. The prisoners were often stripped and subjected to sexual humiliation, as a weapon to control their behavior. Prisoners began to suffer a wide array of humiliations and punishments at the hands of the guards. Toilet facilities became a privilege, instead of a basic human right, with access to them being frequently denied; the inmates often had to clean the toilet facilities with their bare hands. Mattresses were confiscated from the prisoners and they were forced to sleep on cold, hard floors. Prisoners were often stripped and subjected to sexual humiliation, as a weapon to control their behavior.

The study created more new questions than it answered, about the amorality and darkness that inhabits the human psyche. As a purely scientific venture, the experiment was a failure, but it generated some results that tend to slip into predefined roles, behaving in a way that they thought was required, rather than using their own judgment and morals. The ethical implications of this study are still being debated, and it has raised questions about the treatment of prisoners and the role of prison guards.

In the days of the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo abuses, the Stanford Prison Experiment is once again becoming relevant, showing that systematic abuse and denial of human rights is something that happens during the course of the study. Guards immersed in such a situation tend to develop a streak of sadism, and Zimbardo himself started to become internalized in the experiment. Two staff members even broke parole to avoid being involved, and there were reports of guards mistreating prisoners in the basement of Stanford University.

To conduct the Stanford Prison Experiment, Zimbardo constructed a mock correctional facility in a high school in the city of San Francisco. On the second day of the experiment, the prisoners organized a mass revolt and riot, as a protest about the conditions. Guards worked extra hours and devised a strategy to break up the protest by firing tear gas and using flashbulbs. Prisoners became institutionalized very quickly, and the guards began to lose sight of their humanity. The study was halted after six days when the authorities, or prisoner abuse may occur. The Stanford Prison Experiment is widely regarded as a classic example of psychological manipulation and the dangers of conformity.

Conclusions

Results

Criticisms

Background

The Palo Alto Police had agreed to help with the experiment. As if they were real-life authorities, they also have rigid protocols to which they are supposed to stick. In addition, the study was conducted with very few controls, and it is unlikely that it would be sanctioned today; it could pose ethical issues. Zimbardo, acting as a prison warden, would be able to observe and make notes about what happened during the course of the study. He could also institute reforms and put down the riot, using fire-extinguishers. Prisoners were often subjected to psychological and physical abuse, and their psychological state became apparent very quickly.

In fairness to Zimbardo, most of these discussions take place with a lot of hindsight, and he is often criticized for not stopping the experiment sooner. The Stanford Prison Experiment is a testament to the power of authority and the potential for human beings to succumb to it. The experiment showed that human nature can be manipulated and that people can be made to act against their own beliefs. It also highlighted the importance of ethical considerations in scientific research and the potential for psychological manipulation.