

# Informed Consent and the Stanford Prison Experiment

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## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the following topics of sociology:

1. Stanford County Prison Experiment
2. Informed Consent

## 1. STANFORD COUNTY PRISON EXPERIMENT

The **Stanford County prison experiments** were conducted in the 1970s by a psychologist at Stanford named Philip Zimbardo. Zimbardo was interested in whether or not the people who went to prison were inherently bad, deviant, aggressive people filled with rage, or whether the prison institution itself promoted these kind of behaviors amongst inmates and guards.

Did the fact of being in the physical space of prison make guards more sadistic and aggressive? Did it make prisoners deviant? Did it make them misbehave?

Philip Zimbardo was actually asking a question about the institution of prison.

### IN CONTEXT

Zimbardo got a group of 24 clinically sane young men to take part in his prison experiment. He assigned 12 of them to the guard group and the other 12 to the prisoner group.

People knew they were taking part in this study, but those in the prisoner group didn't know when they were going to be 'taken' to prison. Zimbardo arrested them by surprise. It was very official, and he tried to make it as realistic as possible—they were arrested, taken to the prison, stripped, given uniforms, numbers, etc. The guards had whistles and uniforms, too.

As soon as he got the prisoners in and the guards set up, Zimbardo started cameras rolling and observed. The experiment was supposed to last two weeks, but it got so ugly that he was forced to cut the experiment short after only six days.

As soon as prisoners got in there, the guards became sadistic and hostile, forcing the prisoners to do demeaning, effacing things like clean toilets with their bare hands, etc. In response to their new situation, prisoners became sad and depressed; some cried, and some became angry and hostile at the guards.

Normal, clinically sane people in both groups started to act insane when thrown into this situation.



#### BIG IDEA

Zimbardo's key findings were that people weren't inherently bad, sadistic, depressed, etc., but that the institution promoted these behaviors among people. Prison violence was symptomatic of the institution of prison itself rather than of the inherent personalities of either guards or prisoners.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Stanford Prison Experiment

Famous experiment that revealed how the prison structure effects social behavior and shed light on the ethical concerns of social research.

## 2. INFORMED CONSENT

The Stanford County prison experiment illustrates what you're not supposed to do when experimenting with human subjects. It violates what we call **informed consent**, which states that when you're doing research with human subjects, everyone must be notified in advance of all the responsibilities and potential risks and dangers of the study.

You can't do as Zimbardo did and pull people out of their homes, put them in a mock prison and deprive them of the basics, without their knowledge or consent.



#### BIG IDEA

When conducting sociological research, and all social science research for that matter, you must follow the principle of informed consent any time you're involving human subjects.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Informed Consent

When doing research that involves human subjects, everyone must be notified in advance of all the responsibilities, risks, and dangers that are potentially associated with the study.



#### SUMMARY

Today you learned about the **Stanford County prison experiment** and how it illustrates what you're not supposed to do with respect to **informed consent** when conducting social research.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Informed Consent**

When doing research that involves human subjects, everyone must be notified in advance of all the responsibilities, risks, and dangers that are potentially associated with the study.

### **Stanford Prison Experiment**

Famous experiment that revealed how the prison structure effects social behavior and shed light on the ethical concerns of social research.