

## **SOCIAL INFLUENCE: ZIMBARDO COMFORMITY TO SOCIAL ROLE**

**Aim:** to investigate how readily people would conform to new roles by observing how quickly people would adopt the roles of guard or prisoner in a role-playing exercise that simulated prison life. Zimbardo was interested in finding out whether the brutality reported among guards in American prisons was due to the sadistic personalities of the guards or had more to do with the prison environment.

### **Procedures:**

- ❑ Well-adjusted, healthy male volunteers were paid \$15 a day to take part in a two-week simulation study of prison life
- ❑ Volunteers were given psychometric tests to establish their adjustment
- ❑ They were randomly allocated to the roles of prisoners or guards
- ❑ Local police helped by "arresting" nine prisoners at their homes, without warning. They were taken, blindfolded, to the "prison", stripped, sprayed with disinfectant, given smocks to wear and their prison number to memorise. From then on they were referred to by number only.
- ❑ There were three guards, who wore khaki uniforms, dark glasses and carried wooden batons
- ❑ No physical aggression was permitted

### **Findings:**

- ❑ The guards, who were permitted to devise most of the rules, harassed the prisoners and conformed to their perceived roles with such zeal that the study had to be discontinued after six days
- ❑ Prisoners rebelled against the guards after only two days. Guards quelled the rebellion using fire extinguishers
- ❑ Some prisoners became depressed and anxious; one prisoner had to be released after only one day. Two more prisoners had to be released on the fourth day

### **Conclusions:**

- ❑ The "prison environment" was an important factor in creating the guards' brutal behaviour (none of the participants who acted as guards had shown sadistic tendencies before the study)
- ❑ People will readily conform to the social roles they are expected to play, especially if the roles are as strongly stereotyped as those of prison guards
- ❑ The roles that people play shape their attitudes and behaviour. If it took only six days to alter the behaviour of the participants in this study, then the roles we play in real life will have even more far-reaching effects

### **Criticisms:**

- ❑ The study has received many ethical criticisms, including those about lack of fully informed consent by participants and the humiliation and distress experienced by those who acted as prisoners
- ❑ Zimbardo was wrong to act as both prison-superintendent and chief researcher as this produced conflict of roles whereby he lost sight of the harm being done to prisoners