

# 1. THE STORY: AN OVERVIEW OF THE EXPERIMENT

## A QUIET SUNDAY MORNING...

On a quiet Sunday morning in August, a Palo Alto, California, police car swept through the town picking up college students as part of a mass arrest for violation of Penal Codes 211, Armed Robbery, and Burglary, a 459 PC. The suspect was picked up at his home, charged, warned of his legal rights, spread-eagled against the police car, searched, and handcuffed – often as surprised and curious neighbours looked on.

The suspect was then put in the rear of the police car and carried off to the police station, the sirens wailing.



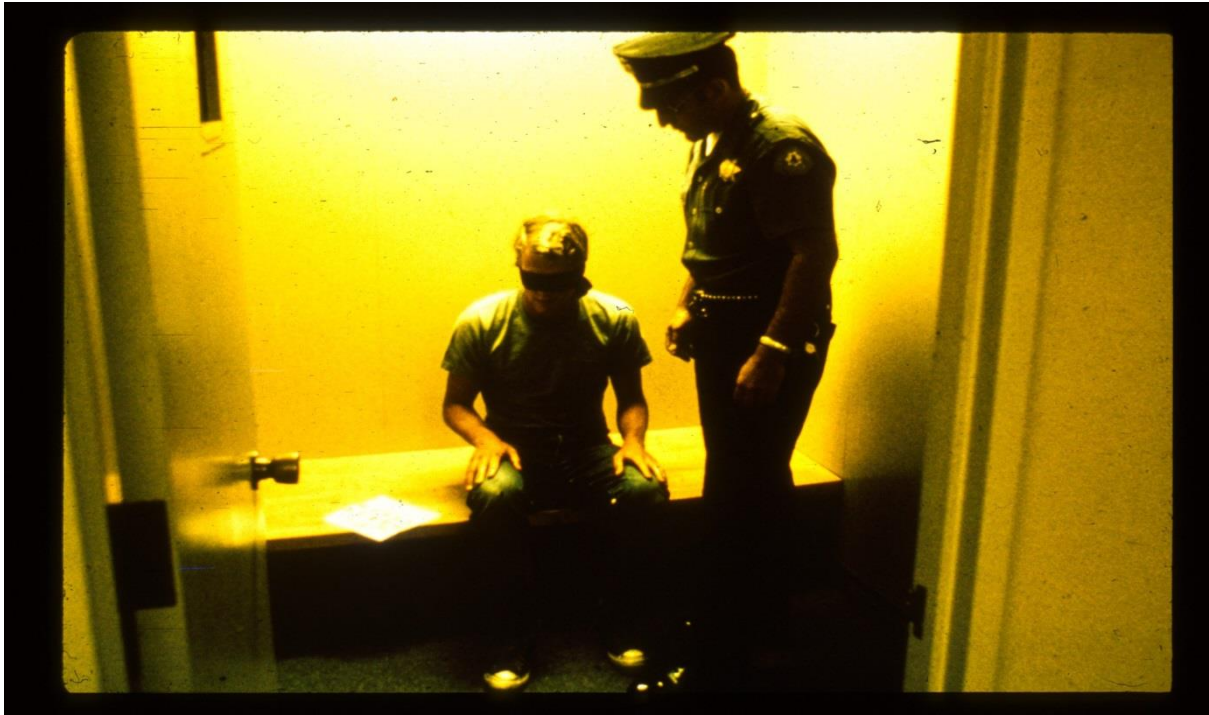


<https://youtu.be/sYtX2sEaeFE>

The car arrived at the station, the suspect was brought inside, formally booked, again warned of his Miranda rights, finger printed, and a complete identification was made. The suspect was then taken to a holding cell where he was left blindfolded to ponder his fate and wonder what he had done to get himself into this mess.







## DISCUSSION

*Consider the police procedures which make arrestees feel confused, fearful, and dehumanized. Note that this policeman is wearing sunglasses just like those we had our "guards" wear and as did the head of the National Guard at Attica Prison during its bloody 1971 riot!*

## 2. SETTING UP

### VOLUNTEERS

What suspects had done was to answer a local newspaper ad calling for volunteers in a study of the psychological effects of prison life. We wanted to see what the psychological effects were of becoming a prisoner or prison guard. To do this, we decided to set up a simulated prison and then carefully note the effects of this institution on the behaviour of all those within its walls.

More than 70 applicants answered our ad and were given diagnostic interviews and personality tests to eliminate candidates with psychological problems, medical disabilities, or a history of crime or drug abuse. Ultimately, we were left with a sample of 24 college students from the U.S. and Canada who happened to be in the Stanford area and wanted to earn \$15/day by participating in a study. On all dimensions that we were able to test or observe, they reacted normally.

Our study of prison life began, then, with an average group of healthy, intelligent, middle-class males. These boys were arbitrarily divided into two groups by a flip of the coin. Half were randomly assigned to be guards, the other to be prisoners. It is important to remember that at the beginning of our experiment there were no differences between boys assigned to be a prisoner and boys assigned to be a guard.



## CONSTRUCTING THE EXPERIMENT

To help us closely simulate a prison environment, we called upon the services of experienced consultants. Foremost among them was a former prisoner who had served nearly seventeen years behind bars. This consultant made us aware of what it was like to be a prisoner. He also introduced us to a number of other ex-convicts and correctional personnel during an earlier Stanford summer school class we co-taught on "The Psychology of Imprisonment."

Our prison was constructed by boarding up each end of a corridor in the basement of Stanford's Psychology Department building. That corridor was "The Yard" and was the only outside place where prisoners were allowed to walk, eat, or exercise, except to go to the toilet down the hallway (which prisoners did blindfolded so as not to know the way out of the prison).

To create prison cells, we took the doors off some laboratory rooms and replaced them with specially made doors with steel bars and cell numbers.





<https://youtu.be/TShFPParenk>



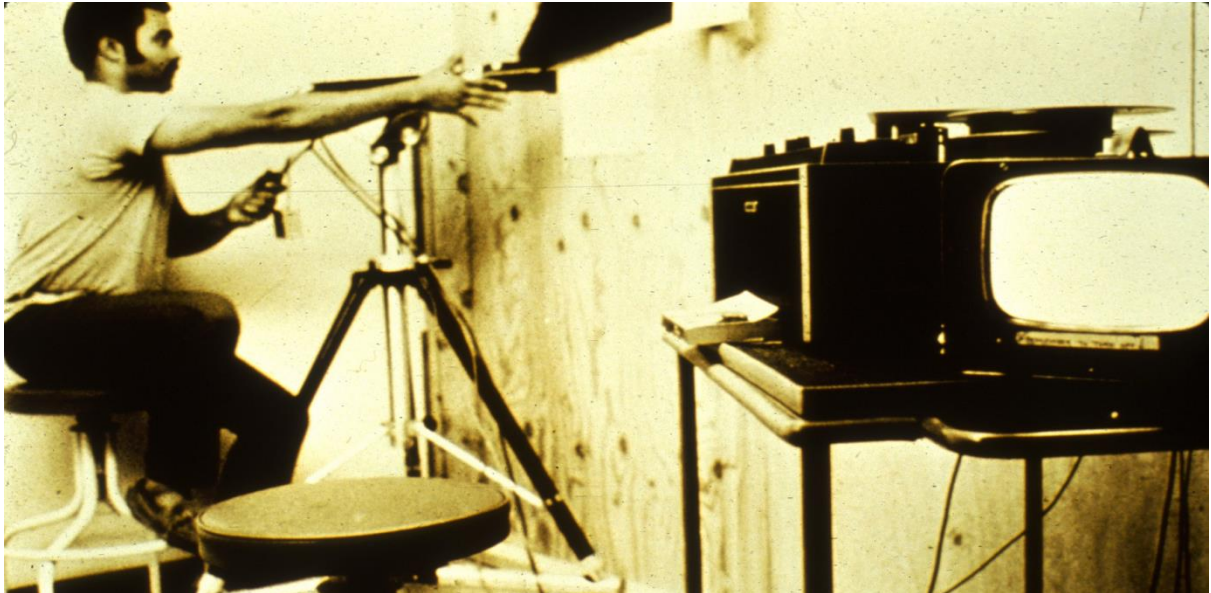


At one end of the hall was a small opening through which we could videotape and record the events that occurred. On the side of the corridor opposite the cells was a small closet which became "The Hole," or solitary confinement. It was dark and very confining, about two feet wide and two feet deep, but tall enough that a "bad prisoner" could stand up. An intercom system allowed us to secretly bug the cells to monitor what the prisoners discussed, and also to make public announcements to the prisoners. There were no windows or clocks to judge the passage of time, which later resulted in some time-distorting experiences.



With these features in place, our jail was ready to receive its first prisoners, who were waiting in the detention cells of the Palo Alto Police Department.





**DISCUSSION:**

*What are the effects of living in an environment with no clocks, no view of the outside world, and minimal sensory stimulation?*

### **3. ARRIVAL**

#### **A STATE OF MILD SHOCK**

Blindfolded and in a state of mild shock over their surprise arrest by the city police, our prisoners were put into a car and driven to the "Stanford County Jail" for further processing. The prisoners were then brought into our jail one at a time and greeted by the warden, who conveyed the seriousness of their offense and their new status as prisoners.



### **HUMILIATION**

Each prisoner was systematically searched and stripped naked. He was then deloused with a spray, to convey our belief that he may have germs or lice – as can be seen in this series of photos.







A degradation procedure was designed in part to humiliate prisoners and in part to be sure they weren't bringing in any germs to contaminate our jail. This procedure was similar to the scenes captured by Danny Lyons in these Texas prison photos.



### DISCUSSION:

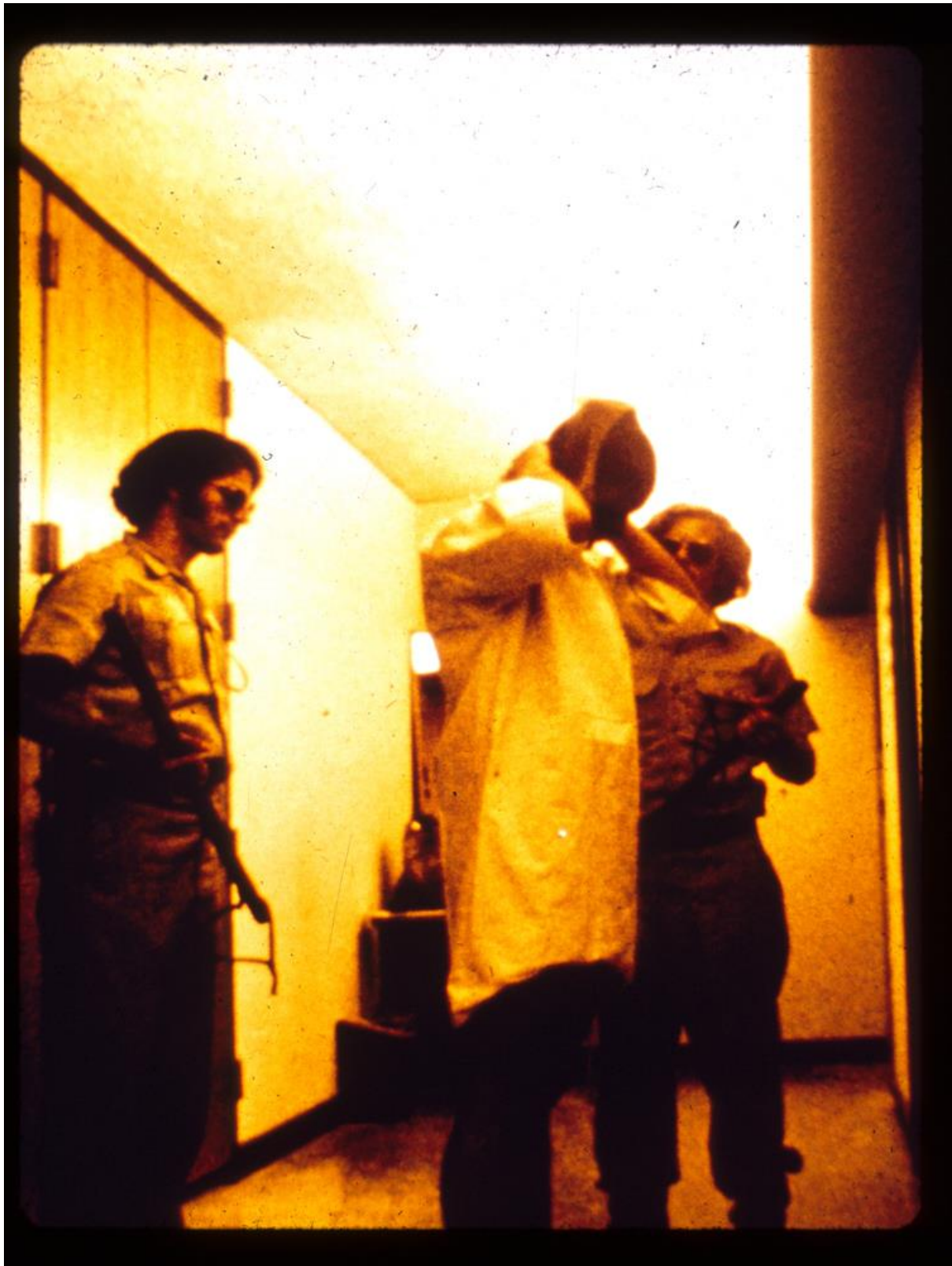
*Consider the psychological consequences of stripping, delousing, and shaving the heads of prisoners or members of the military. What transformations take place when people go through an experience like this?*

The prisoner was then issued a uniform. The main part of this uniform was a dress, or smock, which each prisoner wore at all times with no underclothes. On the smock, in front and in back, was his prison ID number. On each prisoner's right ankle was a heavy chain, bolted on and worn at all times. Rubber sandals were the footwear, and each prisoner covered his hair with a stocking cap made from a woman's nylon stocking.

It should be clear that we were trying to create a functional simulation of a prison – not a literal prison. Real male prisoners don't wear dresses, but real male prisoners do feel humiliated and do feel emasculated. Our goal was to produce similar effects quickly by putting men in a dress without any underclothes. Indeed, as soon as some of our prisoners were put in these uniforms they began to walk and to sit differently, and to hold themselves differently – more like a woman than like a man.

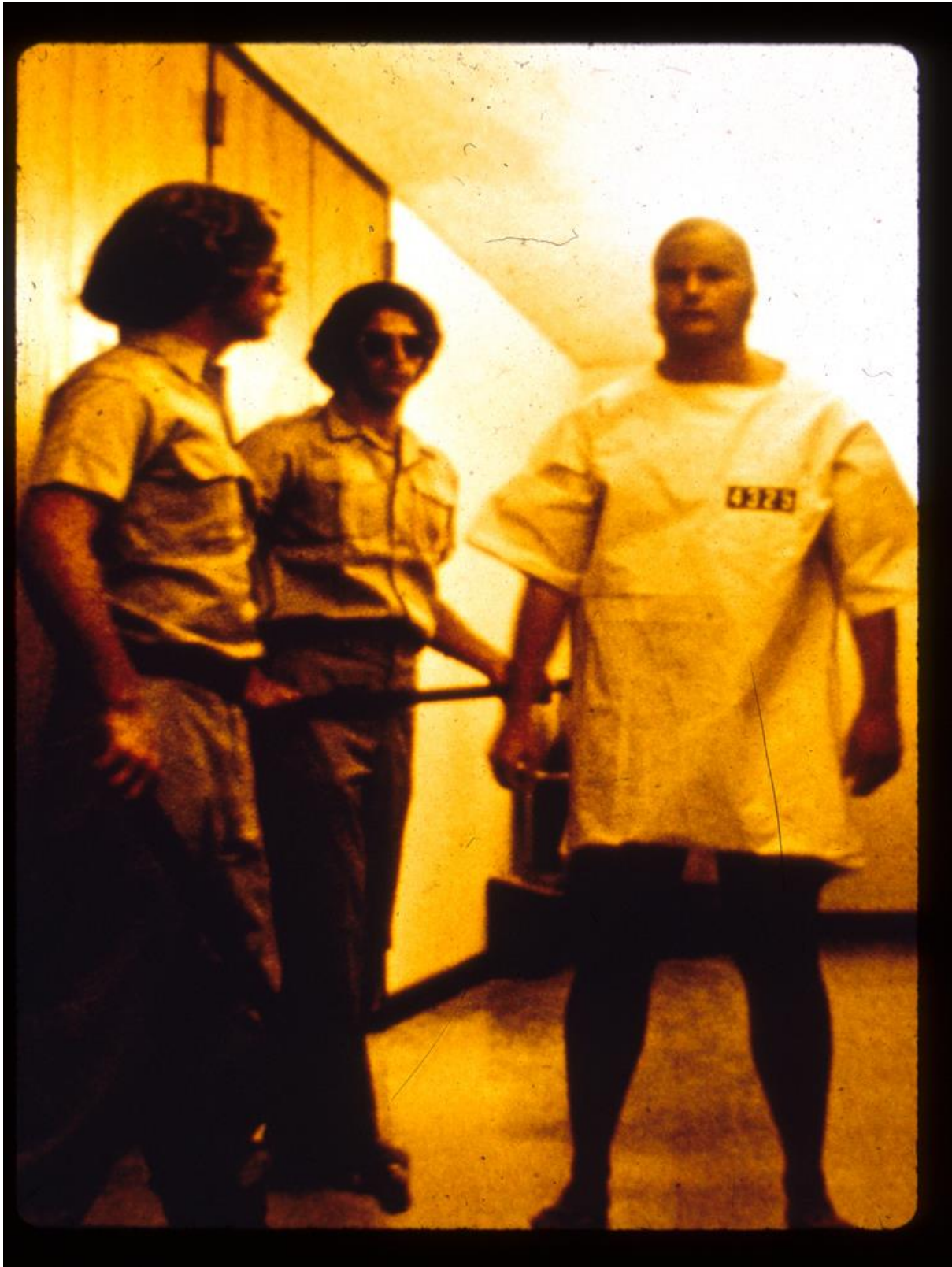


The chain on their foot, which also is uncommon in most prisons, was used in order to remind prisoners of the oppressiveness of their environment. Even when prisoners were asleep, they could not escape the atmosphere of oppression. When a prisoner turned over, the chain would hit his other foot, waking him up and reminding him that he was still in prison, unable to escape even in his dreams.









The use of ID numbers was a way to make prisoners feel anonymous. Each prisoner had to be called only by his ID number and could only refer to himself and the other prisoners by number.

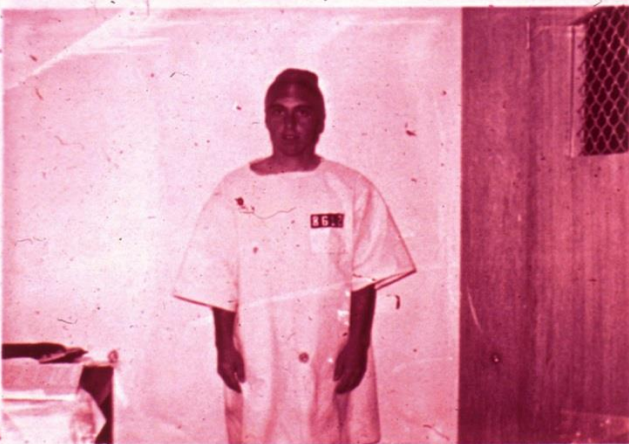
The stocking cap on his head was a substitute for having the prisoner's hair shaved off. The process of having one's head shaved, which takes place in most prisons as well as in the military, is designed in part to minimize each person's individuality, since some people express their individuality through hair style or length. It is also a way of getting people to begin complying with the arbitrary, coercive rules of the institution. The dramatic change in appearance of having one's head shaved can be seen on this page.



## 4. GUARDS

### ENFORCING LAW

The guards were given no specific training on how to be guards. Instead they were free, within limits, to do whatever they thought was necessary to maintain law and order in the prison and to command the respect of the prisoners. The guards made up their own set of rules, which they then carried into effect under the supervision of Warden David Jaffe, an undergraduate from Stanford University. They were warned, however, of the potential seriousness of their mission and of the possible dangers in the situation they were about to enter, as, of course, are real guards who voluntarily take such a dangerous job.

BUREAU OF CRIMINAL IDENTIFICATION AND INVESTIGATION	
P. O. BOX 1859, SACRAMENTO 9, CALIFORNIA	
<div data-bbox="188 1355 252 1400">DATE / OR P.</div> 	<div data-bbox="1002 1355 1289 1400">DISPOSITION OR SENTENCE</div> <div data-bbox="1024 1377 1264 1400">(Include ONLY FINAL dispositions)</div> <div data-bbox="1013 1556 1348 1684" style="border: 2px solid black; padding: 10px; font-size: 2em;">8612</div> <div data-bbox="1013 1765 1264 1787">FOR INSTITUTIONS USE ONLY</div> <div data-bbox="981 1818 1034 1841">Expires</div>
<div data-bbox="188 1863 370 1886">st relative or friend</div> <div data-bbox="188 1921 210 1944">SS</div> <div data-bbox="188 1944 466 1966">and/or arrest report number</div>	<div data-bbox="1056 1863 1216 1886">INSTRUCTIONS</div> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. TYPE OR PRINT all information.</li> <li>2. Note amputations in proper finger squares.</li> <li>3. REPLY WILL QUOTE ONLY NUMBER APPEARING IN THE BLOCK MARKED ROOM</li> </ol>

As with real prisoners, our prisoners expected some harassment, to have their privacy and some of their other civil rights violated while they were in prison, and to get a minimally adequate diet – all part of their informed consent agreement when they volunteered.





This is what one of our guards looked like. All guards were dressed in identical uniforms of khaki, and they carried a whistle around their neck and a billy club borrowed from the police. Guards also wore special sun-glasses, an idea I borrowed from the movie *Cool Hand Luke*. Mirror sunglasses prevented anyone from seeing their eyes or reading their emotions, and thus helped to further promote their anonymity. We were, of course, studying not only the prisoners but also the guards, who found themselves in a new power-laden role. We began with nine guards and nine prisoners in our jail. Three guards worked each of three eight-hour shifts, while three prisoners occupied each of the three barren cells around the clock. The remaining guards and prisoners from our sample of 24 were on call in case they were needed. The cells were so small that there was room for only three cots on which the prisoners slept or sat, with room for little else.



### **ASSERTING AUTHORITY**

At 2:30 A.M. the prisoners were rudely awakened from sleep by blasting whistles for the first of many "counts." The counts served the purpose of familiarizing the prisoners with their numbers (counts took place several times each shift and often at night). But more



importantly, these events provided a regular occasion for the guards to exercise control over the prisoners. At first, the prisoners were not completely into their roles and did not take the counts too seriously. They were still trying to assert their independence. The guards, too, were feeling out their new roles and were not yet sure how to assert authority over their prisoners. This was the beginning of a series of direct confrontations between the guards and prisoners.

<https://youtu.be/x3wxEmHqVCY>





Push-ups were a common form of physical punishment imposed by the guards to punish infractions of the rules or displays of improper attitudes toward the guards or institution. When we saw the guards demand push-ups from the prisoners, we initially thought this was an inappropriate kind of punishment for a prison – a rather juvenile and minimal form of punishment. However, we later learned that push-ups were often used as a form of punishment in Nazi concentration camps, as can be seen in this drawing by a former concentration camp inmate, Alfred Kantor. It's noteworthy that one of our guards also stepped on the prisoners' backs while they did push-ups, or made other prisoners sit or step on the backs of fellow prisoners doing their push-ups.





#### **DISCUSSION:**

*At first push-ups were not a very aversive form of punishment, but they became more so as the study wore on. Why the change?*

## **5. REBELLION**

### **ASSERTING INDEPENDENCE**

Because the first day passed without incident, we were surprised and totally unprepared for the rebellion which broke out on the morning of the second day. The prisoners removed their stocking caps, ripped off their numbers, and barricaded themselves inside the cells by putting their beds against the door. And now the problem was, what were we going to do about this rebellion? The guards were very much angered and frustrated because the prisoners also began to taunt and curse them. When the morning shift of guards came on, they became upset at the night shift who, they felt, must have been too lenient. The guards had to handle the rebellion themselves, and what they did was fascinating for the staff to behold.

<https://youtu.be/uTdttd7XTfQ>

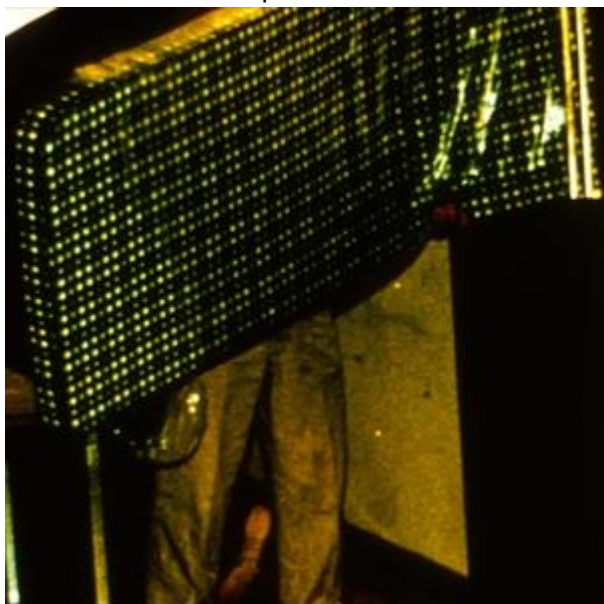


At first they insisted that reinforcements be called in. The three guards who were waiting on stand-by call at home came in and the night shift of guards voluntarily remained on duty to bolster the morning shift. The guards met and decided to treat force with force. They got a fire extinguisher which shot a stream of skin-chilling carbon dioxide, and they forced the prisoners away from the doors. (The fire extinguishers were present in compliance with the requirement by the Stanford Human Subjects Research Panel, which was concerned about potential fire threats).





The guards broke into each cell, stripped the prisoners naked, took the beds out, forced the ringleaders of the prisoner rebellion into solitary confinement, and generally began to harass and intimidate the prisoners.



### **SPECIAL PRIVILEGES**

The rebellion had been temporarily crushed, but now a new problem faced the guards. Sure, nine guards with clubs could put down a rebellion by nine prisoners, but you couldn't have nine guards on duty at all times. It's obvious that our prison budget could not support such a ratio of staff to inmates. So what were they going to do? One of the guards came up with a solution. "Let's use psychological tactics instead of physical ones." Psychological tactics amounted to setting up a privilege cell.

One of the three cells was designated as a "privilege cell." The three prisoners least involved in the rebellion were given special privileges. They got their uniforms back, got their beds back, and were allowed to wash and brush their teeth. The others were not. Privileged prisoners also got to eat special food in the presence of the other prisoners who had temporarily lost the privilege of eating. The effect was to break the solidarity among prisoners.



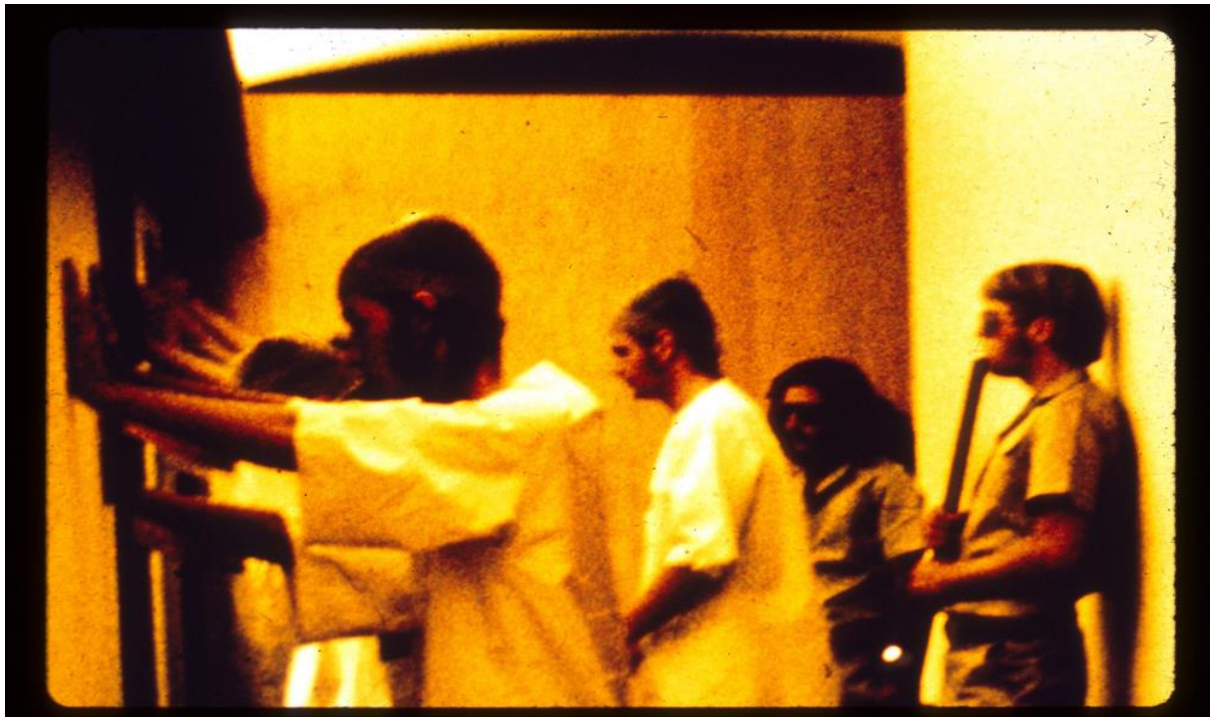


**DISCUSSION:**

How do you think you would have behaved if you were a prisoner in this situation? Would you have rejected these privileges in order to maintain prisoner solidarity?

After half a day of this treatment, the guards then took some of these "good" prisoners and put them into the "bad" cells, and took some of the "bad" prisoners and put them into the "good" cell, thoroughly confusing all the prisoners. Some of the prisoners who were the ringleaders now thought that the prisoners from the privileged cell must be informers, and suddenly, the prisoners became distrustful of each other. Our ex-convict consultants later informed us that a similar tactic is used by real guards in real prisons to break prisoner alliances. For example, racism is used to pit Blacks, Chicanos, and Anglos against each other. In fact, in a real prison the greatest threat to any prisoner's life comes from fellow prisoners. By dividing and conquering in this way, guards promote aggression among inmates, thereby deflecting it from themselves.

The prisoners' rebellion also played an important role in producing greater solidarity among the guards. Now, suddenly, it was no longer just an experiment, no longer a simple simulation. Instead, the guards saw the prisoners as troublemakers who were out to get them, who might really cause them some harm. In response to this threat, the guards began stepping up their control, surveillance, and aggression.







Every aspect of the prisoners' behaviour fell under the total and arbitrary control of the guards. Even going to the toilet became a privilege which a guard could grant or deny at his whim. Indeed, after the nightly 10:00 P.M. lights out "lock-up," prisoners were often forced to urinate or defecate in a bucket that was left in their cell. On occasion the guards would not allow prisoners to empty these buckets, and soon the prison began to smell of urine and faeces -- further adding to the degrading quality of the environment.

The guards were especially tough on the ringleader of the rebellion, Prisoner #5401. He was a heavy smoker, and they controlled him by regulating his opportunity to smoke. We later learned, while censoring the prisoners' mail, that he was a self-styled radical activist. He had volunteered in order to "expose" our study, which he mistakenly thought was an establishment tool to find ways to control student radicals. In fact, he had planned to sell the story to an underground newspaper when the experiment was over! However, even he fell so completely into the role of prisoner that he was proud to be elected leader of the Stanford County Jail Grievance Committee, as revealed in a letter to his girlfriend.

## DISCUSSION

*Most prisoners believed that the subjects selected to be guards were chosen because they were bigger than those who were made prisoners, but actually, there was no difference in the average height of the two groups. What do you think caused this misperception?*

## 6. GRIEVANCES

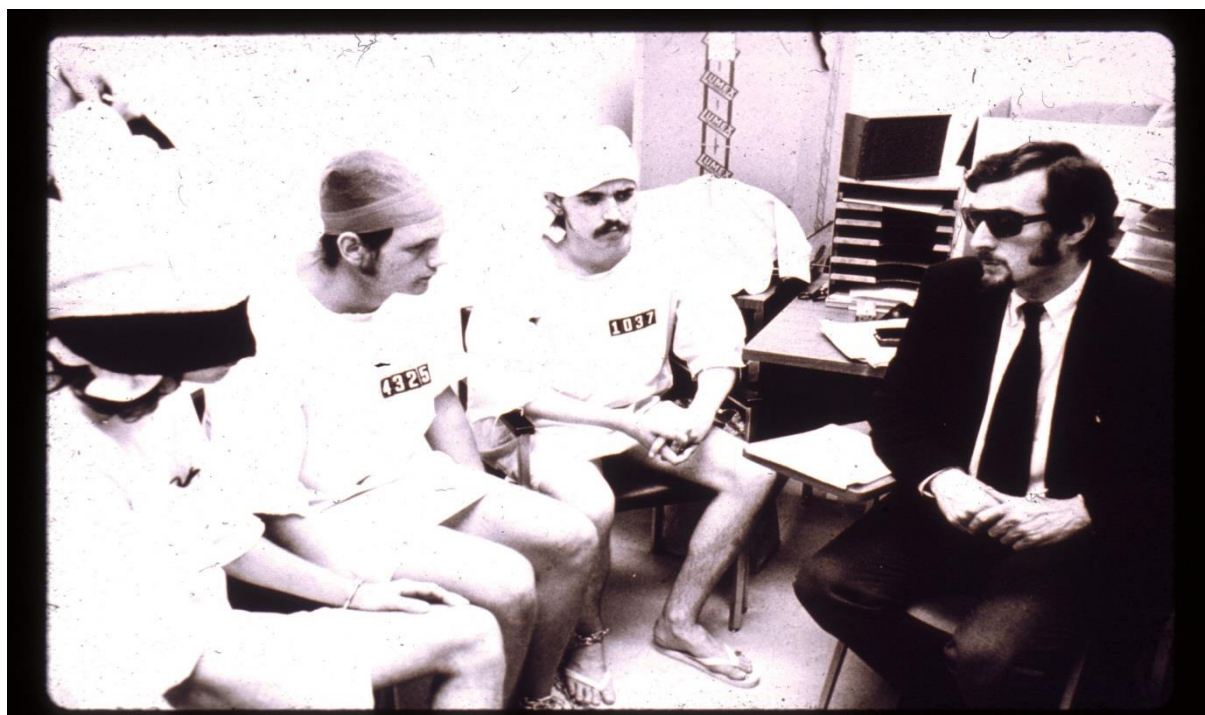
### THE FIRST PRISONER RELEASED

Less than 36 hours into the experiment, Prisoner #8612 began suffering from acute emotional disturbance, disorganized thinking, uncontrollable crying, and rage. In spite of all of this, we had already come to think so much like prison authorities that we thought he was trying to "con" us – to fool us into releasing him.

When our primary prison consultant interviewed Prisoner #8612, the consultant chided him for being so weak, and told him what kind of abuse he could expect from the guards and the prisoners if he were in San Quentin Prison. #8612 was then given the offer of becoming an informant in exchange for no further guard harassment. He was told to think it over.

<https://youtu.be/gbDy4ZtB2fU>

During the next count, Prisoner #8612 told other prisoners, "You can't leave. You can't quit." That sent a chilling message and heightened their sense of really being imprisoned. #8612 then began to act "crazy," to scream, to curse, to go into a rage that seemed out of control. It took quite a while before we became convinced that he was really suffering and that we had to release him.



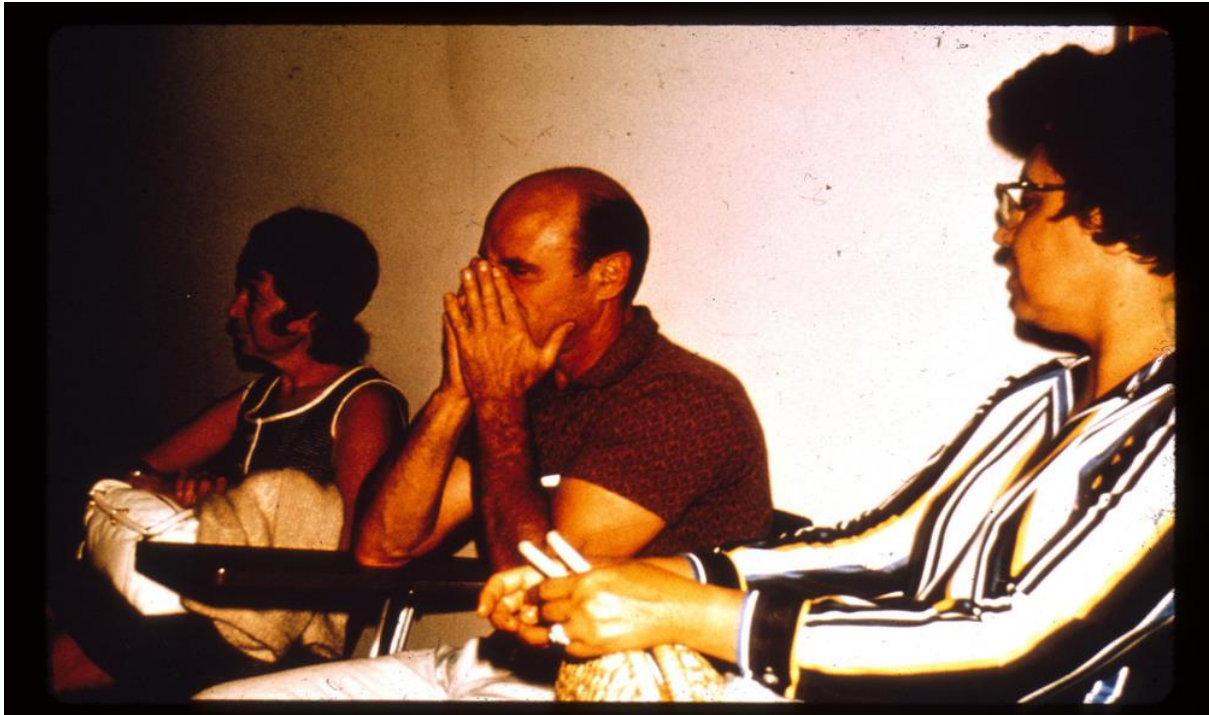
### **PARENTS AND FRIENDS**

The next day, we held a visiting hour for parents and friends. We were worried that when the parents saw the state of our jail, they might insist on taking their sons home. To counter this, we manipulated both the situation and the visitors by making the prison environment seem pleasant and benign. We washed, shaved, and groomed the prisoners, had them clean and polish their cells, fed them a big dinner, played music on the intercom, and even had an attractive former Stanford cheerleader, Susie Phillips, greet the visitors at our registration desk.



When the dozen or so visitors came, full of good humour at what seemed to be a novel, fun experience, we systematically brought their behaviour under situational control. They had to register, were made to wait half an hour, were told that only two visitors could see any one prisoner, were limited to only ten minutes of visiting time, and had to be under the surveillance of a guard during the visit. Before any parents could enter the visiting area, they also had to discuss their son's case with the Warden. Of course, parents complained about these arbitrary rules, but remarkably, they complied with them. And so they, too, became bit players in our prison drama, being good middle-class adults.





Some of the parents got upset when they saw how fatigued and distressed their son was. But their reaction was to work within the system to appeal privately to the Superintendent to make conditions better for their boy. When one mother told me she had never seen her son looking so bad, I responded by shifting the blame from the situation to her son. "What's the matter with your boy? Doesn't he sleep well?" Then I asked the father, "Don't you think your boy can handle this?"

He bristled, "Of course he can – he's a real tough kid, a leader." Turning to the mother, he said, "Come on Honey, we've wasted enough time already." And to me, "See you again at the next visiting time."

## DISCUSSION

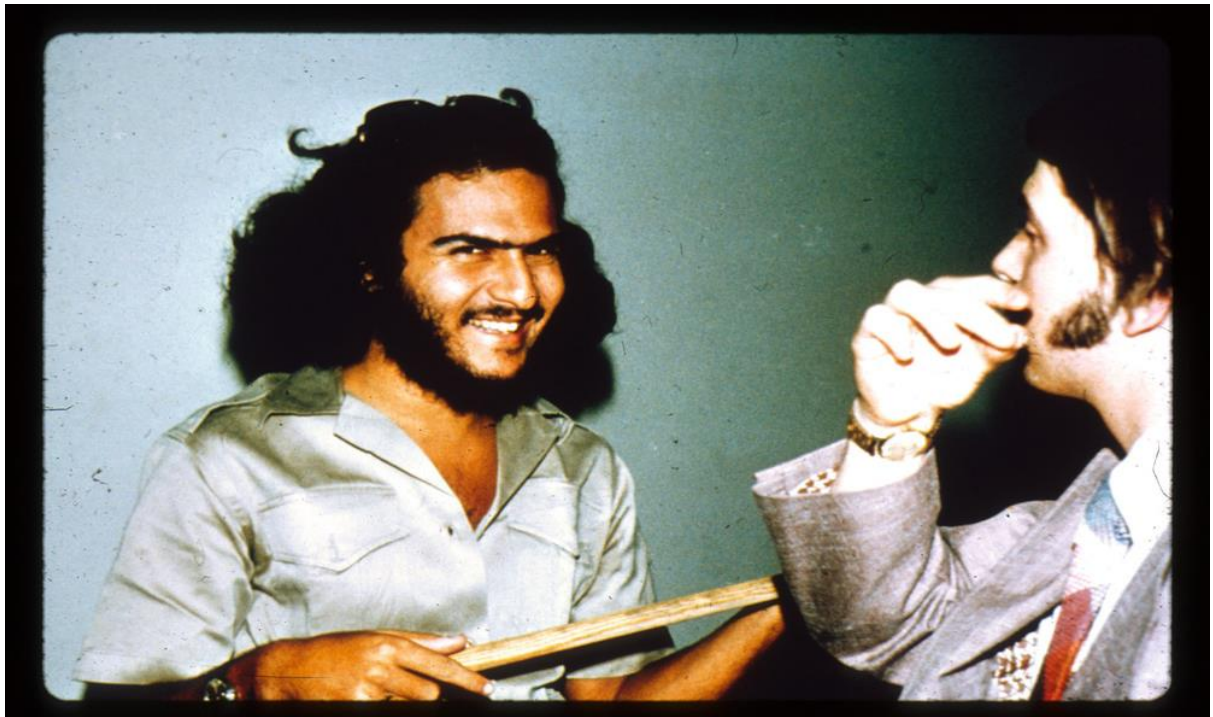
*Compare the reactions of these visitors to the reactions of civilians in encounters with the police or other authorities. How typical was their behaviour?*

## 7. ESCAPE

### A MASS ESCAPE PLOT

The next major event we had to contend with was a rumoured mass escape plot. One of the guards overheard the prisoners talking about an escape that would take place immediately after visiting hours. The rumour went as follows: Prisoner #8612, whom we had released the night before, was going to round up a bunch of his friends and break in to free the prisoners. How do you think we reacted to this rumour? Do you think we recorded the pattern of rumour transmission and prepared to observe the impending escape? That was what we should have done, of course, if we were acting like experimental social psychologists. Instead, we reacted with concern over the security of our prison. What we did was to hold a strategy session with the Warden, the Superintendent, and one of the chief lieutenants, Craig Haney, to plan how to foil the escape.











After our meeting, we decided to put an informant (an experimental confederate) in the cell that #8612 had occupied. The job of our informant would be to give us information about the escape plot. Then I went back to the Palo Alto Police Department and asked the sergeant if we could have our prisoners transferred to their old jail.

My request was turned down because the Police Department would not be covered by insurance if we moved our prisoners into their jail. I left angry and disgusted at this lack of cooperation between our correctional facilities (I was now totally into my role).

Then we formulated a second plan. The plan was to dismantle our jail after the visitors left, call in more guards, chain the prisoners together, put bags over their heads, and transport them to a fifth floor storage room until after the anticipated break in. When the conspirators came, I would be sitting there alone. I would tell them that the experiment was over and we had sent all of their friends home, that there was nothing left to liberate. After they left, we'd bring our prisoners back and redouble the security of our prison. We even thought of luring #8612 back on some pretext and then imprisoning him again because he was released on false pretences.

## A VISIT



I was sitting there all alone, waiting anxiously for the intruders to break in, when who should happen along but a colleague and former Yale graduate student roommate, Gordon Bower. Gordon had heard we were doing an experiment, and he came to see what was going on. I briefly described what we were up to, and Gordon asked me a very simple question: "Say, what's the independent variable in this study?"

To my surprise, I got really angry at him. Here I had a prison break on my hands. The security of my men and the stability of my prison was at stake, and now, I had to deal with this bleeding-heart, liberal, academic, effete dingdong who was concerned about the independent variable! It wasn't until much later that I realized how far into my prison role I was at that point -- that I was thinking like a prison superintendent rather than a research psychologist.

## DISCUSSION

*In an exploratory study such as this, one problem is defining what the "data" are -- the information we should collect. Also, what should have been done to minimize the effects of experimenter bias on the outcome of the study? What were the dangers of the principal investigator assuming the role of prison superintendent?*



## **PAYING THEM BACK**

The rumour of the prison break turned out to be just a rumour. It never materialized. Imagine our reaction! We had spent an entire day planning to foil the escape, we begged the police department for help, moved our prisoners, dismantled most of the prison – we didn't even collect any data that day. How did we react to this mess? With considerable frustration and feelings of dissonance over the effort we had put in to no avail. Someone was going to pay for this.

The guards again escalated very noticeably their level of harassment, increasing the humiliation they made the prisoners suffer, forcing them to do menial, repetitive work such as cleaning out toilet bowls with their bare hands. The guards had prisoners do push-ups, jumping jacks, whatever the guards could think up, and they increased the length of the counts to several hours each.





## **8. CONCLUSION**

### **A KAFKAESQUE ELEMENT**

At this point in the study, I invited a Catholic priest who had been a prison chaplain to evaluate how realistic our prison situation was, and the result was truly Kafkaesque. The chaplain interviewed each prisoner individually, and I watched in amazement as half the prisoners introduced themselves by number rather than name. After some small talk, he popped the key question: "Son, what are you doing to get out of here?" When the prisoners responded with puzzlement, he explained that the only way to get out of prison was with the help of a lawyer. He then volunteered to contact their parents to get legal aid if they wanted him to, and some of the prisoners accepted his offer.





The priest's visit further blurred the line between role-playing and reality. In daily life this man was a real priest, but he had learned to play a stereotyped, programmed role so well – talking in a certain way, folding his hands in a prescribed manner – that he seemed more like a movie version of a priest than a real priest, thereby adding to the uncertainty we were all feeling about where our roles ended and our personal identities began.





The only prisoner who did not want to speak to the priest was Prisoner #819, who was feeling sick, had refused to eat, and wanted to see a doctor rather than a priest. Eventually he was persuaded to come out of his cell and talk to the priest and superintendent so we could see what kind of a doctor he needed. While talking to us, he broke down and began to cry hysterically, just as had the other two boys we released earlier. I took the chain off his foot, the cap off his head, and told him to go and rest in a room that was adjacent to the prison yard. I said that I would get him some food and then take him to see a doctor. While I was doing this, one of the guards lined up the other prisoners and had them chant aloud: "Prisoner #819 is a bad prisoner. Because of what Prisoner #819 did, my cell is a mess, Mr. Correctional Officer." They shouted this statement in unison a dozen times.

As soon as I realized that #819 could hear the chanting, I raced back to the room where I had left him, and what I found was a boy sobbing uncontrollably while in the background his fellow prisoners were yelling that he was a bad prisoner. No longer was the chanting disorganized and full of fun, as it had been on the first day. Now it was marked by utter conformity and compliance, as if a single voice was saying, "#819 is bad."

I suggested we leave, but he refused. Through his tears, he said he could not leave because the others had labelled him a bad prisoner. Even though he was feeling sick, he wanted to go back and prove he was not a bad prisoner.

At that point I said, "Listen, you are not #819. You are [his name], and my name is Dr. Zimbardo. I am a psychologist, not a prison superintendent, and this is not a real prison. This is just an experiment, and those are students, not prisoners, just like you. Let's go."

He stopped crying suddenly, looked up at me like a small child awakened from a nightmare, and replied, "Okay, let's go."





<https://youtu.be/Ol1KB-rIqA>

### **PAROLE BOARD**

The next day, all prisoners who thought they had grounds for being paroled were chained together and individually brought before the Parole Board. The Board was composed mainly of people who were strangers to the prisoners (departmental secretaries and graduate students) and was headed by our top prison consultant.



Several remarkable things occurred during these parole hearings. First, when we asked prisoners whether they would forfeit the money they had earned up to that time if we were to parole them, most said yes. Then, when we ended the hearings by telling prisoners to go back to their cells while we considered their requests, every prisoner obeyed, even though they could have obtained the same result by simply quitting the experiment. Why did they obey? Because they felt powerless to resist. Their sense of reality had shifted, and they no longer perceived their imprisonment as an experiment. In the psychological prison we had created, only the correctional staff had the power to grant paroles.

During the parole hearings we also witnessed an unexpected metamorphosis of our prison consultant as he adopted the role of head of the Parole Board. He literally became the most hated authoritarian official imaginable, so much so that when it was over he felt sick at who he had become – his own tormentor who had previously rejected his annual parole requests for 16 years when he was a prisoner.

### **TYPES OF GUARDS**

By the fifth day, a new relationship had emerged between prisoners and guards. The guards now fell into their job more easily – a job which at times was boring and at times was interesting.

There were three types of guards. First, there were tough but fair guards who followed prison rules. Second, there were "good guys" who did little favours for the prisoners and never punished them. And finally, about a third of the guards were hostile, arbitrary, and inventive in their forms of prisoner humiliation. These guards appeared to thoroughly enjoy the power they wielded, yet none of our preliminary personality tests were able to predict this behaviour. The only link between personality and prison behaviour was a finding that prisoners with a high degree of authoritarianism endured our authoritarian prison environment longer than did other prisoners.



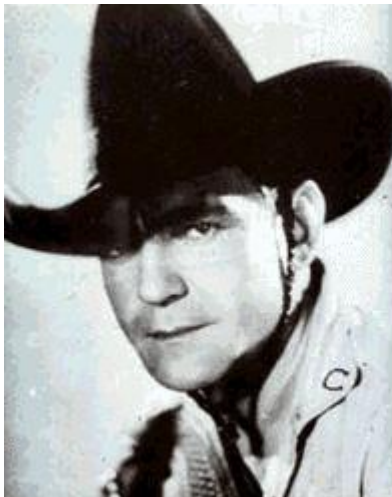


## DISCUSSION

*In 2003 U.S. soldiers abused Iraqi prisoners held at Abu Ghraib, 20 miles west of Baghdad. The prisoners were stripped, made to wear bags over their heads, and sexually humiliated while the guards laughed and took photographs. How is this abuse similar to or different from what took place in the Stanford Prison Experiment?*

## JOHN WAYNE

The prisoners even nicknamed the most macho and brutal guard in our study "John Wayne." Later, we learned that the most notorious guard in a Nazi prison near Buchenwald was named "Tom Mix" – the John Wayne of an earlier generation -- because of his "Wild West" cowboy macho image in abusing camp inmates.



Where had our "John Wayne" learned to become such a guard? How could he and others move so readily into that role? How could intelligent, mentally healthy, "ordinary" men become perpetrators of evil so quickly? These were questions we were forced to ask.

## PRISONERS' COPING STYLES

Prisoners coped with their feelings of frustration and powerlessness in a variety of ways. At first, some prisoners rebelled or fought with the guards. Four prisoners reacted by breaking down emotionally as a way to escape the situation. One prisoner developed a psychosomatic

rash over his entire body when he learned that his parole request had been turned down. Others tried to cope by being good prisoners, doing everything the guards wanted them to do. One of them was even nicknamed "Sarge," because he was so military-like in executing all commands.



By the end of the study, the prisoners were disintegrated, both as a group and as individuals. There was no longer any group unity; just a bunch of isolated individuals hanging on, much like prisoners of war or hospitalized mental patients. The guards had won total control of the prison, and they commanded the blind obedience of each prisoner.

### **ONE FINAL ACT OF REBELLION**

We did see one final act of rebellion. Prisoner #416 was newly admitted as one of our stand-by prisoners. Unlike the other prisoners, who had experienced a gradual escalation of harassment, this prisoner's horror was full-blown when he arrived. The "old timer" prisoners told him that quitting was impossible, that it was a real prison.

Prisoner #416 coped by going on a hunger strike to force his release. After several unsuccessful attempts to get #416 to eat, the guards threw him into solitary confinement for three hours, even though their own rules stated that one hour was the limit. Still, #416 refused.

At this point #416 should have been a hero to the other prisoners. But instead, the others saw him as a troublemaker. The head guard then exploited this feeling by giving prisoners a choice. They could have #416 come out of solitary if they were willing to give up their blanket, or they could leave #416 in solitary all night.

What do you think they chose? Most elected to keep their blanket and let their fellow prisoner suffer in solitary all night. (We intervened later and returned #416 to his cell.)

<https://youtu.be/uczcm1RGIPg>





### **AN END TO THE EXPERIMENT**

On the fifth night, some visiting parents asked me to contact a lawyer in order to get their son out of prison. They said a Catholic priest had called to tell them they should get a lawyer or public defender if they wanted to bail their son out! I called the lawyer as requested, and he came the next day to interview the prisoners with a standard set of legal questions, even though he, too, knew it was just an experiment.

At this point it became clear that we had to end the study. We had created an overwhelmingly powerful situation -- a situation in which prisoners were withdrawing and behaving in pathological ways, and in which some of the guards were behaving sadistically. Even the "good" guards felt helpless to intervene, and none of the guards quit while the study was in progress. Indeed, it should be noted that no guard ever came late for his shift, called in sick, left early, or demanded extra pay for overtime work.



I ended the study prematurely for two reasons. First, we had learned through videotapes that the guards were escalating their abuse of prisoners in the middle of the night when they thought no researchers were watching and the experiment was "off." Their boredom had driven them to ever more pornographic and degrading abuse of the prisoners.

Second, Christina Maslach, a recent Stanford Ph.D. brought in to conduct interviews with the guards and prisoners, strongly objected when she saw our prisoners being marched on a toilet run, bags over their heads, legs chained together, hands on each other's shoulders. Filled with outrage, she said, "It's terrible what you are doing to these boys!" Out of 50 or more outsiders who had seen our prison, she was the only one who ever questioned its morality. Once she countered the power of the situation, however, it became clear that the study should be ended.

And so, after only six days, our planned two-week prison simulation was called off.

On the last day, we held a series of encounter sessions, first with all the guards, then with all the prisoners (including those who had been released earlier), and finally with the guards, prisoners, and staff together. We did this in order to get everyone's feelings out in the open, to recount what we had observed in each other and ourselves, and to share our experiences, which to each of us had been quite profound.

We also tried to make this a time for moral re-education by discussing the conflicts posed by this simulation and our behaviour. For example, we reviewed the moral alternatives that had been available to us, so that we would be better equipped to behave morally in future real-life situations, avoiding or opposing situations that might transform ordinary individuals into willing perpetrators or victims of evil.

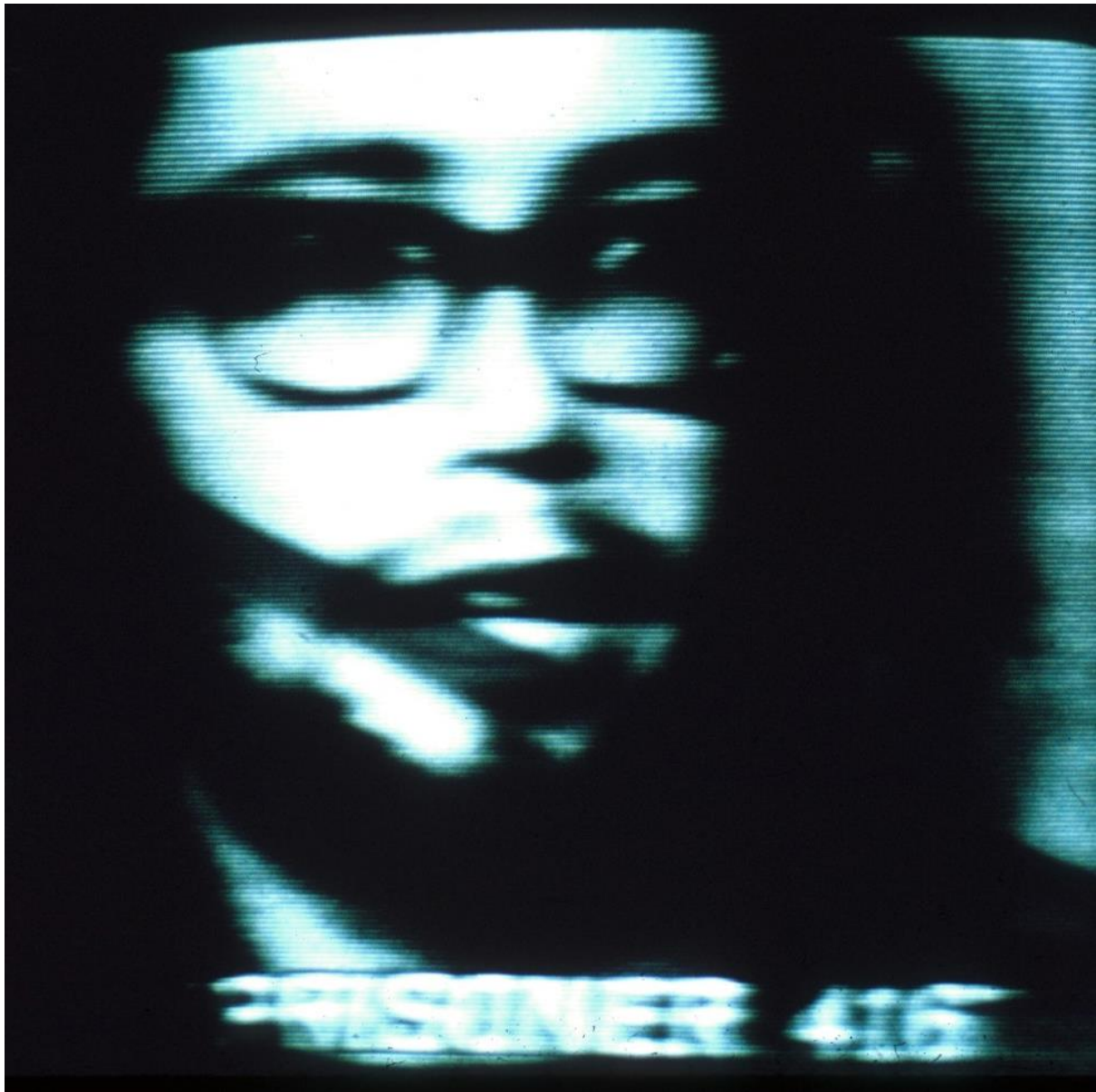
## **DISCUSSION**

*In the encounter sessions, all the prisoners were happy the experiment was over, but most of the guards were upset that the study was terminated prematurely. Why do you think the guards reacted this way?*

Two months after the study, here is the reaction of prisoner #416, our would-be hero who was placed in solitary confinement for several hours:

"I began to feel that I was losing my identity, that the person that I called Clay, the person who put me in this place, the person who volunteered to go into this prison – because it was a prison to me; it still is a prison to me. I don't regard it as an experiment or a simulation because it was a prison run by psychologists instead of run by the state. I began to feel that that identity, the person that I was that had decided to go to prison was distant from me – was remote until finally I wasn't that, I was 416. I was really my number."





Compare his reaction to that of the following prisoner who wrote to me from an Ohio penitentiary after being in solitary confinement for an inhumane length of time:

"I was recently released from solitary confinement after being held therein for thirty-seven months. The silence system was imposed upon me and if I even whispered to the man in the next cell resulted in being beaten by guards, sprayed with chemical mace, black jacked, stomped, and thrown into a strip cell naked to sleep on a concrete floor without bedding, covering, wash basin, or even a toilet....I know that thieves must be punished, and I don't justify stealing even though I am a thief myself. But now I don't think I will be a thief when I am released. No, I am not rehabilitated either. It is just that I no longer think of becoming wealthy or stealing. I now only think of killing -- killing those who have beaten me and treated me as if I were a dog. I hope and pray for the sake of my own soul and future life of freedom that I am able to overcome the bitterness and hatred which eats daily at my soul. But I know to overcome it will not be easy."

<https://youtu.be/fQnOkmvigi0>

#### **TERMINATED ON AUGUST 20, 1971**

Our study was terminated on August 20, 1971. The next day, there was an alleged escape attempt at San Quentin. Prisoners in the Maximum Adjustment Center were released from

their cells by Soledad brother George Jackson, who had smuggled a gun into the prison. Several guards and some informant prisoners were tortured and murdered during the attempt, but the escape was prevented after the leader was allegedly gunned down while trying to scale the 30-foot high prison walls.

Less than one month later, prisons made more news when a riot erupted at Attica Prison in New York. After weeks of negotiations with prisoners who held guards hostage while demanding basic human rights, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered the National Guard to take back the prison by full force. A great many guards and prisoners were killed and injured by that ill-advised decision.

One of the major demands of the prisoners at Attica was that they be treated like human beings. After observing our simulated prison for only six days, we could understand how prisons dehumanize people, turning them into objects and instilling in them feelings of hopelessness. And as for guards, we realized how ordinary people could be readily transformed from the good Dr. Jekyll to the evil Mr. Hyde.



The question now is how to change our institutions so that they promote human values rather than destroy them. Sadly, in the decades since this experiment took place, prison conditions and correctional policies in the United States have become even more punitive and destructive. The worsening of conditions has been a result of the politicization of corrections, with politicians vying for who is toughest on crime, along with the racialization of arrests and sentencing, with African-Americans and Hispanics overrepresented. The media has also contributed to the problem by generating heightened fear of violent crimes even as statistics show that violent crimes have decreased.

There are more Americans in prisons than ever before. According to a Justice Department survey, the number of jailed Americans more than doubled during the past decade, with over 2 million people in jail or prison by 2005. To learn more about prisons, the Stanford Prison Experiment, and parallels with recent events such as the abuse of Iraqi prisoners, please consult the bibliography below or visit the [Related Links](#) page.

### **THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT: A FILM BY KYLE PATRICK ALVAREZ**

<https://youtu.be/7LviGTHud5w>



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## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. What police procedures are used during arrests, and how do these procedures lead people to feel confused, fearful, and dehumanized?
2. If you were a guard, what type of guard would you have become? How sure are you?.
3. What prevented "good guards" from objecting or countermanding the orders from tough or bad guards?
4. If you were a prisoner, would you have been able to endure the experience? What would you have done differently than those subjects did? If you were imprisoned in a "real" prison for five years or more, could you take it?
5. Why did our prisoners try to work within the arbitrary prison system to effect a change in it (e.g., setting up a Grievance Committee), rather than trying to dismantle or change the system through outside help?
6. What factors would lead prisoners to attribute guard brutality to the guards' disposition or character, rather than to the situation?
7. What is "reality" in a prison setting? This study is one in which an illusion of imprisonment was created, but when do illusions become real? Contrast consensual reality and physical or biological reality, and explain the implications of the following poem (by PGZ):

Within the illusion of life, Death is the only reality,  
But is Reality the only death?  
Within the reality of imprisonment,  
Illusion is the only freedom,  
But is Freedom the only illusion?

8. What is identity? Is there a core to your self-identity independent of how others define you? How difficult would it be to remake any given person into someone with a new identity?
9. Do you think that kids from an urban working class environment would have broken down emotionally in the same way as did our middle-class prisoners? Why? What about women?
10. After the study, how do you think the prisoners and guards felt when they saw each other in the same civilian clothes again and saw their prison reconverted to a basement laboratory hallway?
11. Moving beyond physical prisons built of steel and concrete, what psychological prisons do we create for ourselves and others? If prisons are seen as forms of control which limit individual freedom, how do they differ from the prisons we create through racism, sexism, ageism, poverty, and other social institutions? Extend your discussion to focus on:
  - The illusion of prison created in marriages where one spouse becomes "guard" and the other becomes "prisoner"
  - The illusion of prison created in neurosis where one aspect of the person becomes the prisoner who is told he/she is inadequate and hopeless, while another aspect serves as a personal guard
  - The silent prison of shyness, in which the shy person is simultaneously his or her own guard and prisoner
12. Was it ethical to do this study? Was it right to trade the suffering experienced by participants for the knowledge gained by the research? (The experimenters did not take this issue lightly, although the Slide Show may sound somewhat matter-of-fact about the events and experiences that occurred).



13. How do the ethical dilemmas in this research compare with the ethical issues raised by Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments? Would it be better if these studies had never been done?
14. If you were the experimenter in charge, would you have done this study? Would you have terminated it earlier? Would you have conducted a follow-up study?
15. How can we change our real institutions, such as Attica Prison, when they are designed to resist critical evaluation and operate in relative secrecy from taxpayers and legislators?
16. Knowing what this research says about the power of prison situations to have a corrosive effect on human nature, what recommendations would you make about changing the correctional system in your country?