

## **My Role In the Stanford Prison Experiment**

In August of 1971, I had just completed my doctorate at Stanford University, where I was the office mate of Craig Haney, and was preparing to start my new job as an assistant professor of psychology at the Univer-

sity of California, Berkeley. Relevant background also should include mention that I had recently gotten involved romantically with Phil Zimbardo, and we were even considering the possibility of marriage. Although I had heard from Phil and other colleagues about the plans for their prison simulation study, I had not participated in either the preparatory work or the initial days of the actual simulation. Ordinarily I would have been more interested and maybe become involved in some way, but I was in the process of moving, and my focus was on preparing for my first teaching job. However, I agreed when Phil asked me, as a favor, to help conduct some interviews with the study participants. The interviews were to be done on Friday, nearly a week after the start of the study, to assess some of the subjective impact of participation on the guards, as well as the prisoners. I came down to Palo Alto on Thursday night to visit the "prison" and get some sense of what was going on.

When I went downstairs to the basement location of the prison, I viewed the yard from the observation point at the end of the hall (where the video camera was set up). Not much was happening at that point, and there was not much to see. I then went to the other end of the hall, where the guards entered the yard; there was a room outside the yard entrance, which the guards used to rest and relax when not on duty or to change into or out of their uniforms at the start or end of their shifts. I talked to one of the guards there who was waiting to begin his shift. He was very pleasant, polite and friendly, surely a person anyone would consider a really nice guy.

Later on, one of the research staff mentioned to me that I should take a look at the yard again, because the new late-night guard shift had come on, and this was the notorious "John Wayne" shift. John Wayne was the nickname for the guard who was the meanest and toughest of them all; his reputation had preceded him in various accounts I had heard. Of course, I was eager to see who he was and what he was doing that attracted so much attention. When I looked through the observation point, I was absolutely stunned to see that their John Wayne was the "really nice guy" with whom I had chatted earlier. Only now he was transformed into someone else. He not only moved differently, but he talked differently—with a Southern accent. (I discovered later that he was modeling his role on a prison movie character.) He was yelling and cursing at the prisoners as he made them go through "the count," going out of his way to be rude and belligerent. It was an amazing transformation from the person I had just spoken to—a transformation that had

taken place in minutes just by stepping over the line from the outside world into that prison yard. With his military-style uniform, billy club in hand, and dark, silver-reflecting sunglasses to hide his eyes (adopted by Phil from the movie *Cool Hand Luke*), this guy was an all-business, no-nonsense, really mean prison guard.

At around 11 p.m., the prisoners were being taken to the toilet prior to going to bed. The toilet was outside the confines of the prison yard, and this had posed a problem for the researchers, who wanted the prisoners to be "in prison" 24 hours a day (just as in a real prison). They did not want the prisoners to see people and places in the outside world, which would have broken the total environment they were trying to create. So the routine for the bathroom runs was to put paper bags over the prisoners' heads so they couldn't see anything, chain them together in a line, and lead them down the hall into, around, and out of a boiler room and then to the bathroom and back. It also gave the prisoners an illusion of a great distance between the yard and the toilet, which was in fact only in a hallway around the corner.

When the bathroom run took place that Thursday evening, Phil excitedly told me to look up from some report I had been reading: "Quick, quick—look at what's happening now!" I looked at the line of hooded, shuffling, chained prisoners, with guards shouting orders at them—and then quickly averted my gaze. I was overwhelmed by a chilling, sickening feeling. "Do you see that? Come on, look—it's amazing stuff!" I couldn't bear to look again, so I snapped back with, "I already saw it!" That led to a bit of a tirade by Phil (and other staff there) about what was the matter with me. Here was fascinating human behavior unfolding, and I, a psychologist, couldn't even look at it? They couldn't believe my reaction, which they may have taken to be a lack of interest. Their comments and teasing made me feel weak and stupid—the out-of-place woman in this male world—in addition to already feeling sick to my stomach by the sight of these sad boys so totally dehumanized.

A short while later, after we had left the prison setting, Phil asked me what I thought about the entire study. I'm sure he expected some sort of great intellectual discussion about the research and the events we had just witnessed. Instead, what he got was an incredibly emotional outburst from me (I am usually a rather contained person). I was angry and frightened and in tears. I said something like, "What you are doing to those boys is a terrible thing!" What followed was a heated argument between us. That was especially scary for me, because Phil seemed to be

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so different from the man I thought I knew, someone who loves students and cares for them in ways that were already legendary at the university. He was not the same man that I had come to love, someone who is gentle and sensitive to the needs of others and surely to mine. We had never had an argument before of this intensity. Instead of being close and in tune with each other, we seemed to be on opposite sides of some great chasm. Somehow the transformation in Phil (and in me as well) and the threat to our relationship was unexpected and shocking. I don't remember how long the fight went on, but I felt it was too long and too traumatic.

What I do know is that eventually Phil acknowledged what I was saying, apologized for his treatment of me, and realized what had been gradually happening to him and everyone else in the study: that they had all internalized a set of destructive prison values that distanced them from their own humanitarian values. And at that point, he owned up to his responsibility as creator of this prison and made the decision to call the experiment to a halt. By then it was well past midnight, so he decided to end it the next morning, after contacting all the previously re-leased prisoners, and calling in all the guard shifts for a full round of debriefings of guards, prisoners, and then everyone together. A great weight was lifted from him, from me, and from our personal relationship (which celebrated its 25th wedding anniversary on August 10, 1997) .