“Quiet Rage: The Stanford Prison Experiment”
(adapted from http://psychology.about.com/od/classicpsychologystudies/a/stanford-prison-experiment.htm)

In 1971, psychologist Philip Zimbardo and his colleagues set out to create an experiment that looked at the impact of becoming a prisoner or prison guard. Zimbardo, a former classmate of Stanley Milgram (who is best-known for his famous obedience experiment), was interested in expanding upon Milgram's research. He wanted to further investigate the impact of situational variables on human behavior.

The question the researchers asked was how would the participants react when placed in a simulated prison environment. "Suppose you had only kids who were normally healthy, psychologically and physically, and they knew they would be going into a prison-like environment and that some of their civil rights would be sacrificed. Would those good people, put in that bad, evil place—would their goodness triumph?"

The Participants

The researchers set up a mock prison in the basement of Stanford University's psychology building, and then selected 24 undergraduate students to play the roles of both prisoners and guards. The participants were selected from a larger group of 70 volunteers because they had no criminal background, lacked psychological issues and had no major medical conditions. The volunteers agreed to participate for a one- to two-week period in exchange for $15 a day.

The Setting and Procedures

The simulated prison included three six by nine foot prison cells. Each cell held three prisoners and included three cots. Other rooms across from the cells were utilized for the prison guards and warden. One very small space was designated as the solitary confinement room, and yet another small room served as the prison yard.

The 24 volunteers were then randomly assigned to either the prisoner group or the guard group. Prisoners were to remain in the mock prison 24-hours a day for the duration of the study. Guards, on the other hand, were assigned to work in three-man teams for eight-hour shifts. After each shift, guards were allowed to return to their homes until their next shift. Researchers were able to observe the behavior of the prisoners and guards using hidden cameras and microphones.
Questions

After watching “Quiet Rage: The Stanford Prison Experiment”, be ready to answer the following questions (some of these come from the website Zimbardo made about the experiment -- http://www.prisonexp.org/)

1. What do you think about all of this?
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? How sure are you about that?
5. What does this show about the power of social roles and their effect on human behavior?
6. Was it ethical to do this study? Was it right to trade the suffering experienced by participants for the knowledge gained by the research?
7. The experimenters say did not take the ethical issue lightly – how well does that come across in the video?
8. 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?

More Information About Philip Zimbardo

(adapted from his bio on the back of the DVD case)

This study made Philip Zimbardo very famous in the psychological community, and he is to this day. Until very recently, he was a professor at Stanford University. In the forty-ish years since “The Stanford Prison Experiment”, he has become an internationally recognized scholar, education, and media personality, winning numerous awards in each of these areas. He is also a former president of the APA, author of more than 300 publications, and host the PBS series Discovering Psychology (something we used to show students a lot back in the day, but since it was made in the early 1990s it’s getting a little dated). He has made numerous TED talks (hint, hint). Some think he is a self-promoting jerk (like Doug Korpi, aka “Prisoner 8612”, who later cut all contact with Zimbardo¹), but there is no denying that he is one of the most influential psychologists of his generation.

Footnote:
