



PEDAGOGICAL POINTS TO PONDER

Using New Revelations About the Stanford Prison Experiment to Address APA Undergraduate Psychology Major Learning Outcomes

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New revelations from a detailed analysis of the Stanford prison experiment (SPE) archives challenge (a) the study's scientific validity and Philip Zimbardo's creative-evil, situationist narrative for its findings, and (b) indicate the need for teachers and textbook authors to both revise and repurpose the coverage of the SPE in their classes and textbooks, respectively. These revelations afford teachers and authors several opportunities to address scientific inquiry and critical thinking skills and thereby help to satisfy several American Psychological Association undergraduate psychology major learning outcomes. Relevant outcomes include the influence of the historical context and a researcher's biases on scientific inquiry and the relative value of information sources such as media reports versus scientific journals. We provide brief descriptions of how the SPE archival revelations can be used to address these and other learning outcomes.

Keywords: Stanford prison experiment, Philip Zimbardo, scientific inquiry, critical thinking, APA learning outcomes

In August 1971, one of the most famous studies in psychology, the Stanford prison experiment (SPE), began with Philip Zimbardo and his research team (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973a, 1973b) randomly assigning college students to play the role of prisoners and guards in a simulated prison. The generally accepted version of the SPE, the version conveyed in most introductory and social psychology textbooks (Bartels, 2015; Griggs, 2014; Griggs & Whitehead, 2014) and introductory psychology courses (Bartels, Milovich, & Moussier, 2016), is that participants were quickly overwhelmed by situational forces, slipped into their

assigned roles, and exhibited such extreme behavior—abuse by the guards (i.e., creative evil) and despondency among prisoners—that the study (scheduled to run 14 days) had to be stopped prematurely after only 6 days. Thus, this narrative has been taught to millions of psychology students in the past 48 years since the study was conducted. In addition, during this time period Zimbardo has repeated this creative-evil narrative for the SPE hundreds of times in lectures, talks at psychology meetings, media interviews, articles, and books. Welcome to the “illusory truth effect,” a glitch in the human mind that equates repetition with truth (e.g., Fazio, Brashier, Payne, & Marsh, 2015).

This creative-evil narrative is detailed at the SPE website (www.prisonexp.org) and is referred to as “the story.” This “story,” popularized for decades by Zimbardo, has withstood myriad challenges on ethical, theoretical, and methodological grounds (e.g., Banuazizi & Movahedi, 1975; Banyard, 2007; Bartels, 2019; Carnahan & McFarland, 2007; Fromm, 1973;

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Gray, 2013; Haslam & Reicher, 2017). Although unquestionably substantive, these past criticisms have been unable to overcome the significant cultural cachet that the SPE and Zimbardo's narrative for it have acquired. Perhaps this is because issues such as the study's questionable methodology, the post hoc theorizing about the meaning of its results, or even the ethical concerns about the exposure of participants to undue psychological stress have been regarded as tedious distractions relative to the (supposed) compelling message of the SPE. For example, in an interview with Blum (2018), introductory psychology textbook author Kenneth Carter said about the SPE:

Even if the science is quirky . . . I still want students to be mindful that they may find themselves in powerful situations that could override how they might behave as an individual. That's the story that's bigger than the science. (para. 53)

In sum, the story that Zimbardo has built around the SPE seems to have led people to completely discount the study's clear lack of a solid scientific foundation.

New revelations about the SPE, however, cannot be so easily dismissed because they are based on a thorough analysis of the SPE archival materials (hundreds of contemporaneous paper documents and many hours of film and audio recordings) in the Stanford University Library by French researcher Thibault Le Texier (2018, 2019).¹ Le Texier corroborated his archival findings by interviewing 15 of the participants in the SPE. His findings were not only strongly supportive of previous criticisms of the SPE, such as the clear presence of demand characteristics, but also provided new criticisms based on heretofore unknown information.² Briefly, Le Texier found that data collection in the SPE was biased and incomplete; that the way the prison functioned, such as the prison rules and the daily prison schedule, was not devised by the guards but was essentially taken from a prison experiment devised and conducted by students in one of Zimbardo's classes 3 months prior to the SPE; that the guards received precise instructions regarding the treatment of the prisoners; that some of the guards who were not "bad" guards (the majority of the guards) were encouraged to become more abusive (also see Haslam, Reicher, & Van Bavel, 2019); that the guards were not told they were participants, leading them to think that they were part of the research

group; that the participants were almost never completely immersed by the situation as Zimbardo claimed; and that Zimbardo designed the SPE to demonstrate his preconceived belief that prisons were toxic environments and in serious need of reform. Le Texier also found evidence that the two most abusive guards admitted that they were acting and realized that they were doing so. Similarly, the prisoner who supposedly had a nervous breakdown and was the first prisoner to be released has said on several occasions that he was only acting. For more details on these findings, teachers and authors should consult Le Texier (2019).

These archival revelations have led some psychologists to declare that, given its antiscientific nature, it is time to kick the SPE out of the psychological canon and hence, psychology courses and textbooks (e.g., Knowles, 2018; Lapin, 2018). We, however, propose that the SPE can be repurposed and provide psychology teachers and textbook authors new opportunities to meet several of the American Psychological Association's (APA's) psychology major learning outcomes (APA, 2013, 2016). The learning outcomes are enumerated within five main goals: Goal 1—knowledge base in psychology, Goal 2—scientific inquiry and critical thinking, Goal 3—ethical and social responsibility in a diverse world, Goal 4—communication,

¹ Le Texier's findings were originally published in his 2018 book, *Histoire d'un mensonge: Enquête sur l'expérience de Stanford* (Le Texier, 2018). However, his book is presently only available in French. Hence, we used Le Texier's (2019) paper, "Debunking the Stanford prison experiment," which is currently in press in *American Psychologist* and details his archival research and findings, as the source for our study. Le Texier provided us with a prepublication copy of his paper and also verified the accuracy of our summary description of his findings.

² Although Zimbardo posted an online response to his recent SPE critics in June 2018, he did not address Le Texier's numerous criticisms (Zimbardo, 2018). Because Le Texier's (2018) book was mentioned at the beginning of his response, readers might think that these criticisms were addressed because they would not be familiar with them since at that time, they were only discussed in Le Texier's book, *Histoire d'un mensonge*, which was in French. Zimbardo, however, did know about them. Le Texier sent Zimbardo an early version of his paper (in English) summarizing his SPE criticisms in April 2018 (Knowles, 2018). Knowles also reported that she had contacted Zimbardo while doing research for her article on the SPE and asked him to comment on Le Texier's criticisms, but he did not respond.

and Goal 5—professional development. Foundation indicators or outcomes for each of these goals are those that are expected to be met after the completion of several lower level courses, whereas baccalaureate indicators account for expectations for performance upon completion of the major. The SPE revelations align nicely with Goal 2.

We briefly illustrate how the recent SPE revelations can be used to address Learning Outcomes 2.5a/A and 2.2b/B and provide a table summarizing how the revelations address these and some other outcomes (Table 1). It is important to realize that we are only providing some

general suggestions on how the revelations might be used to address these outcomes. Teachers and authors will need to consult [Le Texier \(2019\)](#) for more details on the revelations in order to flesh out the relationship between the revelations and the learning outcomes that they opt to discuss.

APA Learning Outcomes 2.5a/A

APA Learning Outcomes 2.5a/A are concerned with the influence of various types of bias and the historical context on the research process. The recent SPE revelations raise serious questions about [Zimbardo's](#) objectivity and

Table 1

Sample Relationships Between the Stanford Prison Experiment Archival Revelations and the APA Undergraduate Psychology Major Learning Outcomes

SPE revelations	APA learning outcome (foundational)	APA learning outcome (baccalaureate)
Zimbardo bypassed appropriate channels for disseminating SPE findings	2.2b: Describe what kinds of additional information beyond personal experience are acceptable in developing behavioral explanations (i.e., popular press reports vs. scientific findings)	2.2B: Describe the characteristics and relative value of different information sources (e.g., primary vs. secondary)
Zimbardo, a self-described activist, protected his beliefs about the toxicity of prisons and the need for prison reform	2.5a: Relate examples of how a researcher's value system, sociocultural characteristics, and historical context influence the development of scientific inquiry on psychological questions	2.5A: Recognize the systematic influences of sociocultural, theoretical, and personal biases on the research enterprise and evaluate the effectiveness with which researchers address those influences in psychological research
Zimbardo's ad hominem attacks of critics of the study; deception of guards	3.2a: Describe the need for positive personal values (e.g., integrity, benevolence, honesty, respect for human dignity) in building strong relationships with others	3.2A: Exhibit high standards of positive personal values in interpersonal and work-related relationships
Data collection and analysis were biased towards dramatizing the SPE; coaching of guards	2.1e: Describe common fallacies in thinking (e.g., confirmation bias, post hoc explanations, implying causation from correlation) that impair accurate conclusions and predictions	2.1E: Use strategies to minimize committing common fallacies in thinking that impair accurate conclusions and predictions
Deception of guards; prisoners told that they could not leave the study	3.1a: Describe key regulations in the APA Ethics Code for protection of human and nonhuman research participants	3.1A: Evaluate psychological research from the standpoint of adherence to the APA Ethics Code in psychological research involving human or nonhuman research participants
The coaching of guards; lack of immersion and reported acting among participants	2.4g: Describe the fundamental principles of research design	2.4G: Apply knowledge of research skills necessary to be an informed consumer of research or critic regarding unsupported claims about behavior

Note. The first number in the identification of each outcome represents the goal, the second number represents the learning outcome for that goal, and the lowercase letter indicates that it is a foundation indicator and the uppercase indicates that it is a baccalaureate indicator. SPE = Stanford Prison Experiment; APA = American Psychological Association.

the influence of both his value system and the historical context on the SPE. First, consider [Haney and Zimbardo's \(1998\)](#) comments in reflecting on the SPE: "At the time we conducted the SPE—in 1971—there was widespread concern about the fairness and the efficacy of the criminal justice system. Scholars, politicians, and members of the public wondered aloud whether prisons were too harsh . . ." (p. 711). It is against this historical backdrop that Zimbardo's political intentions emerged. Content from an interview with Zimbardo by Ben Blum directly addressed the question of how the historical context and Zimbardo's value system influenced the SPE. For example, consider Zimbardo's comments on prisons in the interview when pressed about his objectivity:

During that course [a course on the psychology of imprisonment], I began to see that prisons are a waste of time, and money, and lives . . . So yes, I am a social activist, and prison reform was always important in my mind. It was not the reason to do the study. ([Blum, 2018](#)).

[Le Texier's \(2019\)](#) archival analysis, however, raises serious doubts about Zimbardo's assertion that this was not the reason for the study. For example, Zimbardo disseminated a press release on Day 2 of what was planned to be a 2-week study that said the SPE would make people aware of the need for prison reforms at a psychological level so that prisoners were not made into "dehumanized" objects by their prison experience. Zimbardo was essentially announcing via the press release what the results of the SPE would be and mean when the study had just begun and not after the study had ended and the data had been analyzed. A similar press release was disseminated on Day 6 of the study. Hence, it seems that Zimbardo had designed the SPE to popularize his beliefs that prisons were toxic environments and needed reform and not to objectively study the impact of prisons on prisoners. A student activity involving this point would be to have students consider how Zimbardo could have minimized the impact of his beliefs on the study. For example, he could have structured the study to attempt to falsify his beliefs rather than verify them; he should not have participated in the study, especially not as prison superintendent; and he should not have overseen the recording of the data in the study.

Teachers could also help students recognize that Zimbardo's lack of openness to alternative explanations and attacking critics rather than answering them are not characteristics of scientific inquiry. For example, Zimbardo's extremely negative response to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) prison study ([Reicher & Haslam, 2006](#); also see [Haslam & Reicher, 2009](#)) could be used to demonstrate his lack of openness to alternative explanations ([Zimbardo, 2006](#)). Briefly, the BBC prison study was an attempt to replicate the SPE in a mock prison, but the guards received no coaching or directions as in the SPE and the prisoners were allowed to quit at any time. Unlike the SPE, there was no guard abuse, and the prisoners did not break down. In response, [Zimbardo \(2006\)](#) said that the BBC prison study was fraudulent and "does not merit acceptance . . . anywhere except in media psychology" and that it was a "scientifically irresponsible 'made-for-TV-study'" (p. 47). Despite Zimbardo's efforts to prevent it, the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, a peer-reviewed psychology journal, published the article on the BBC prison study ([Reicher & Haslam, 2006](#)).³ Zimbardo's responses to his critics are best summed up by [Haslam, Reicher, and Van Bavel \(2018\)](#)—" . . . he insists that his work is a moral crusade, aimed at promoting social justice. And that therefore those who threaten to derail his position need to be swatted aside for the sake of the cause" ("The end of tyranny," para. 2).

APA Learning Outcomes 2.2b/B

Within the psychology information literacy outcomes, 2.2b/B focus on the need to appreciate the relative importance and value of media reports and peer-reviewed journal articles. Upon conclusion of the study, Zimbardo, seemingly motivated by maximum popular exposure

³ BBC prison study author Stephen Reicher pointed out in his interview with Ben Blum ([2018](#)) that "what we discovered was that we weren't in a scientific debate, which is what we thought we were in. We were in a commercial rivalry. At that point he [Zimbardo] was very keen on getting the Hollywood film out" (para. 45). Reicher's comments suggest that Zimbardo's attacks on the BBC prison study may have been driven by a fear that the study's findings might negatively impact the making of a film about the SPE and not the scientific value of the BBC prison study.

of his work, as the two premature press releases would suggest, bypassed peer-reviewed psychology journals in favor of media outlets such as *Life* magazine (Faber, 1971), an episode of an NBC TV show *Chronolog* (Zimbardo, Goldstein, & Utley, 1971), *Society* magazine (Zimbardo, 1972), and *The New York Times Magazine* (Zimbardo, Haney, Banks, & Jaffe, 1973). Notably, the SPE results have never been published in a peer-reviewed psychology journal.

So in what journals were the SPE results initially published? One article appeared in *Naval Research Reviews* (Haney et al., 1973a). According to Zimbardo (2018), the Office of Naval Research insisted that the SPE be documented in their journal because they had funded the research. He also pointed out that the other 1973 SPE article, published in *International Journal of Criminology and Penology* (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973b), was at the invitation of the journal editor. Thus, it was likely not reviewed in the same manner as a regular journal submission. Also, this is not a psychology journal. Regardless, Zimbardo still could have submitted a more complete account of the SPE to a peer-reviewed psychology journal because he claimed in 2007 that the full SPE story had not yet been told (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 20), but he did not. Teachers may wish to explore this decision not to attempt to publish in a peer-reviewed psychology journal and the value of the peer-review process, the principal mechanism for evaluating the quality of scientific research, versus publication outlets without such review.

Given its notoriety, the SPE affords many opportunities to have students explore the relative value of various types of reports on research. Below are examples of how the SPE is described in a media article and how it is described in an academic journal article, respectively:

What did humanity learn from the Stanford Prison Experiment? When you take people from any walk of life and dehumanize them, you get an inhumane result. The “guards”—nice middle class young men in real life—were given identical uniforms and authority that they had no experience with. They transformed into sadists. The prisoners were metaphorically and physically stripped of their basic needs, identity and rights, and turned to rebellion and crime, with several sustaining mental trauma during the process. (Zoukis, 2017, para. 13)

The guards on this “tough and cruel” shift showed more than twice as many deprecation-insults toward the prisoners (mean of 5.17 and 2.29, respectively, $p < .20$). They also tended to use instruments more often than other shifts to keep the prisoners in line. (Haney et al., 1973b, pp. 85–86)

One of the troubling aspects of how the SPE results were reported in media accounts is that the guards (and often the prisoners) are typically described in an unvarying fashion (e.g., “They became sadists”). In *The New York Times Magazine* article (Zimbardo et al., 1973), there are recurrent references to “the guards,” “they,” and “the prisoners.” Yet, what is evident from the second quote from a journal article (Haney et al., 1973b) is that there was definite variance in guard behavior. More precisely, only three (one third) of the guards were classified as bad guards (Le Texier, 2019; Zimbardo, 2007), a detail absent from most media and textbook accounts of the SPE (Bartels, 2015). Not mentioning the guard (and prisoner) variance is a blatant misrepresentation of the SPE findings. As McGreal (2013) has pointed out, no adequate account of the individual differences in behavior shown by the SPE participants has been offered, and therefore, Zimbardo’s conclusion that “situational power triumphs over individual power in certain contexts” (Zimbardo, 2007, p. x) is unfounded.

Also missing from most media accounts of the SPE is the fact that it was not an experiment but rather a psychological simulation of prison life. Teachers could have their students consider how referring to the SPE as an experiment, even though it was not, over the past five decades might have impacted perception of the study and its scientific credibility. Relatedly, teachers could have students discuss the question of whether it is possible to conduct an experiment on prison life and the guard-prisoner relationship. Such a discussion would entail all of the characteristics of conducting experiments, such as independent and dependent variables, operational definition of variables, random selection and assignment of participants, control, and so on.

Conclusions

New revelations about the SPE afford teachers numerous opportunities to teach students about critical thinking and the process and pit-

falls of science and thereby address several of the APA psychology major learning outcomes. We have provided some suggestions on how this might be done. Also, exposing the shortcomings of the SPE and Zimbardo's account of it would help to show students that psychology is a self-correcting science. This would seem especially important given the current replication crisis in social psychology (e.g., Pratkanis, 2017). Lastly, our suggestions for using the recent SPE revelations to help students learn about scientific inquiry and critical thinking align well with recent goals of helping students become better consumers of psychological research (Hard & Gross, 2016) and teaching scientific integrity (Schoenherr, 2015) as well as recent efforts to transform introductory psychology to have a focus on addressing myths and misconceptions and providing students with opportunities to engage in critical thinking (Bernstein, 2017).

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