Stanford Prison Experiment: Lesson Plan

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<th>Topic</th>
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<td>In the middle of August 1971, Philip G. Zimbardo held what would be later called the Stanford Prison Experiment. Twenty four participants were split into two groups: prisoners and guards. Originally planned to last two weeks, the study was stopped after six days once an outside observer expressed concerns over the ethicalness of the work as well as over the wellbeing of the participants. The study has historically pointed to how ordinary people in the right environment will inevitably become broken victims or violent aggressors. It's raised a plethora of ethical questions and recent evidence questions if not outright invalidates Zimbardo's findings.</td>
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<th>Possible subjects/classes</th>
<th>Time needed</th>
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<td>Psychology, Sociology, Civics/Politics/Government</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
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Video link:

https://academy4sc.org/topic/stanford-prison-experiment-role-ing-with-it/

Objective: What will students know/be able to do at the end of class?

Students will be able to...
- Describe the basics of how the original study was conducted and the results
- Identify what about the study was unethical and why
- Explain why the historic “findings” of the study are highly debatable if not outright wrong and what students should take away from the study instead

Key Concepts & Vocabulary

Prisoners, Guards, Unethicalness, Interference of Observers

Materials Needed

None.
Before you watch

Have students describe what they imagine the average prisoner and prison guard to be like. Ask students how these stereotypical examples would behave.

While you watch

1. What were the two roles Zimbardo assigned participants?
2. List one ethical concern raised by the study.
3. List one legitimacy concern of the study.

After you watch/discussion questions

1. What incentives were there for participants to act accordingly with their assigned roles?
2. If you were to recreate this study today, what would you need to change? How would you make it ethical?
3. What other facts concerning the Stanford Prison Experiment further complicate the study’s findings?

Activity Ideas

1. Have students write down how they imagine they themselves might react in this study if they were assigned the role of prisoner or guard. They should also write down their rationale behind their imagined behavior.
2. As a class, debate how one might “fix” the Stanford Prison Experiment. Be sure to have students provide their reasoning for proposed decisions. Allow for debates to occur, especially concerning whether or not the study should be made into a true experiment.

Sources/places to learn more