

Spout
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Stick To The Basics

In the aftermath of the bloody events at San Quentin and Attica, an experiment conducted at Stanford University last August is said to offer some kind of new insight into the brutalizing effects of prison, on both prisoners and their guards.

In the experiment, devised by psychology professor Philip Zimbardo with the help of an ex-inmate, 21 healthy, normal and average students volunteered to spend two weeks in a mock prison set up in the basement of the psychology building. They were randomly divided into 10 "prisoners" and 11 "guards."

The "prisoners" were "arrested" unexpectedly at their homes, handcuffed and taken blindfolded to the "prison," where they were stripped, deloused and subjected from then on to a number of petty cruelties and indignities.

They soon began plotting resistance. The "guards," who wore reflective sunglasses to make themselves more impersonal, soon began thinking of the "prisoners" as less than human and played them off against each other in order to control them.

On the sixth day, as one after another of the "prisoners" began having hysterics, the experiment was called off.

"If we were able to demonstrate that pathological behavior could be produced in so short a time, think what damage is being done in 'real' prisons like Attica and San Quentin," says Zimbardo.

But does this experiment really tell us anything new about "real" prisons?

Anyone who remembers the hazing that fraternity pledges used to have to go through should not be surprised to learn that even nice guys can turn into little tyrants when they are given the opportunity.

Cruelty and indignity and inhumanity do exist in prison, and as long as they do we cannot claim to have a truly civilized society. But it is not this so much as it is the simple fact of being in prison with little real hope for the future — certainly, with little

success in past life to build on — that drives men to despair.

The prison camps of World War II and Korea were not exactly vacation spas. Yet there is no indication that any significant number out of the thousands of men who spent years in them were turned into hardened criminals.

Is it customary for real prison guards to wear sunglasses that hide their eyes? Are real prisoners brought in blindfolded and roused from their beds every night at 2:30 a.m., as the mock prisoners were?

Perhaps not. And perhaps worse things happen in real prisons. But what the Stanford experiment ultimately founders on is the fact that the students who took part in it were not criminals. They were guilty of no crimes; they had not been sentenced by any court.

This is not to say that men who are guilty of crimes and who are legally sentenced by courts are fair game for any kind of treatment which society, in the form of aging prisons and underpaid, undereducated guards, cares to mete out to them. We had evidence enough long before Attica and San Quentin to know what that kind of penal system results in.

It is to say that an experiment like that in the Stanford psychology building is no more necessary than would be one in the university's medical school in which one group of volunteers would be allowed to be bitten by mosquitoes and another group not, the object being to see which group developed yellow fever.

In both cases, we already know what causes the disease. What we need to do is to cure it.